

ISSUE 77 2009

# cineACTION

## DOCUMENTARY & Superheroes

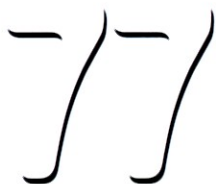


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**FRONT COVER:** Joseph Viles, "Superman" on couch."

**BACK COVER:** Michael Keaton as Batman in *Batman* (1989).

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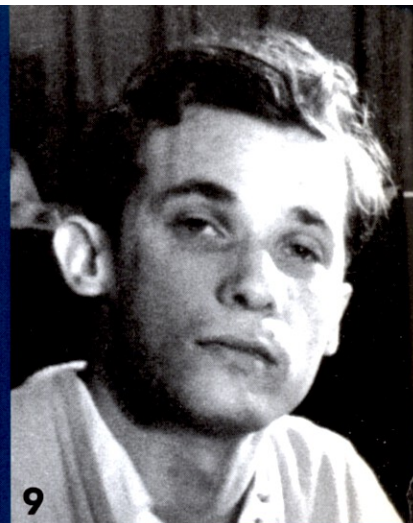
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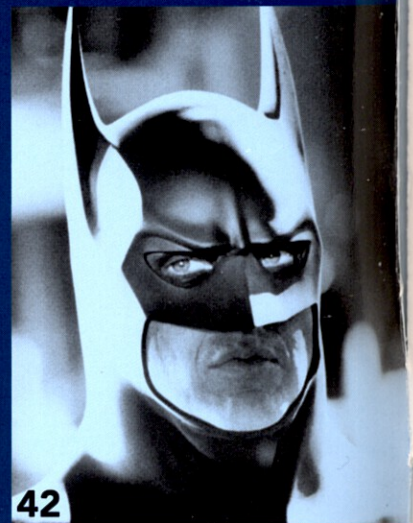
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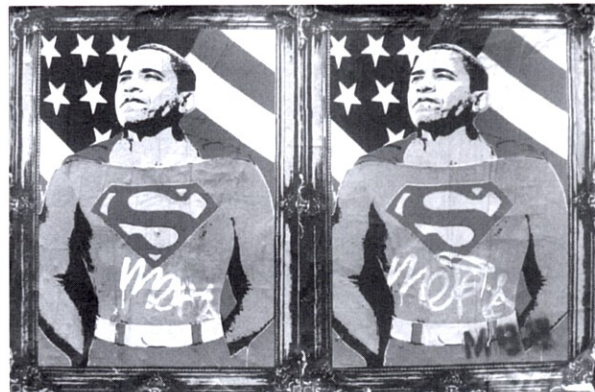
# Documentary and Superheroes

## FROM THE MARGINS TO THE MAINSTREAM

Last summer, when I began to think about a theme for this issue, I happened to glance at the daily newspaper listings of movies currently showing in Toronto. What struck me was that there seemed to be a preponderance, not just of comic-book-hero based films but also of documentaries, two genres that had previously existed in the margins of the film industry, but by mid 2008, seemed to be dominating the mainstream. This comparable surge of popularity is what prompted me to tie together two very disparate genres and modes of filmmaking.

This issue of *Cineaction*, then, addresses this phenomenon by investigating recent developments in both genres. In the first section on documentaries, the topics include a look at Argentina today through the project of making a model of Juan Peron's state-of-the-art plane Pulqui; "direct cinema" and "cinéma-vérité" in Canadian film; the wrongful imprisonment of an Iraqi journalist at Abu Ghraib; and the American independent filmmaker Jennifer Fox. The last paper in the section provides a perfect transition to Superhero films as it considers actors/fans who perform as Superheroes for tourists in Hollywood. "Superheroes" is narrower thematically but nevertheless includes a wide range of approaches, including a look at *Batman* as a 'corporate strategy' which resists convergence culture; the computer-generated superbodies 'worn' by characters in these films; two meditations on reasons why Superhero films don't successfully transfer from their print originals; and an analysis of Will Smith's filmic image in light of the Barack Obama phenomenon. In fact, a sub-text of this issue might be the conflation of 'documentary' (i.e. 'real life') with 'Superhero' (i.e. fantasy saviour-of-the-world) in the *persona* of the recently elected president of the US.

—SUSAN MORRISON



### CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

#### ISSUE 78

**GLOBAL CINEMA NOW?** Consideration of global cinema in the midst of the ongoing crisis of global capitalism. Contributions welcome on films from any national cinema, on particular national developments, on the state of Global Hollywood, on the ongoing transformation of all the mass media, analysis of particular films or genres that reflect contemporary crisis. Open to suggestions.

**CANADIAN FILMS AND TELEVISION** Historical or critical analysis and reviews of Canadian films and television.

Questions to [sforsyth@yorku.ca](mailto:sforsyth@yorku.ca). Submissions in hard copy to Scott Forsyth, Department of Film, Centre for Film and Theatre, York University, Toronto, ON, Canada M3J 1P3.

**Deadline: May 1, 2009**

#### ISSUE 79

**CINEMA AND COLLABORATION** From its origins, the cinema has been a collaborative artform. Cinematic collaborations exist in many variations and in this issue, we invite submissions on collaborations that might have been ongoing, or a one time effort.

Edited by Florence Jacobowitz [fjacob@yorku.ca](mailto:fjacob@yorku.ca) and Richard Lippe [rlippe@yorku.ca](mailto:rlippe@yorku.ca)

Please email any questions or interest to the editor. Submissions in hard copy mailed to the editor 40 Alexander Street, #705, Toronto Ontario, Canada M4Y 1B5

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# Evita in Wonderland

PULQUI AND THE WORKSHOP OF UNDERDEVELOPMENT

TOMÁS F. CROWDER-TARABORRELLI

In their film *The Take* (2004), Avi Lewis and Naomi Klein identify Argentina's 2001 economic collapse and the factory takeover movement that followed as a precursor to the type of disaster capitalism that the United States and developed countries are experiencing today. The film ends with the victory of Nestor Kirchner's Peronist party government and the daunting task of economic recovery given the country's huge national debt and collapsed state of its industries. Six years later, Peronism is still struggling to convey an image of national uplift.

Alejandro Fernández Mouján's *Pulqui: An Instant in a Country's Happiness* (2007) is one of the most provocative documentary films to come out of Argentina in recent years. A story of lost dreams, *Pulqui* reflects on the well-known political cataclysms of Saúl Menem's cannibalistic neoliberalism and Fernando de la Rúa's parsimonious center-left politics, through a revision of history starting with the 1955 military coup that overthrew Juan Domingo Perón's first presidency.

The film's action centres on the construction of a model version of the legendary Pulqui II jet fighter plane. The Pulqui I was

designed for Perón in the late 1940s with the collaboration of Emil Dewoitine from France, and Enrique Cardeilhac and Norberto L. Morchio from Argentina. The Pulqui II, a much improved version of the plane that flew for the first time on June 16 1950, had been designed by world-renown Luftwaffe engineer Kurt Tank, who entered the country with a fake passport. The plane represented a daring technological accomplishment for the Argentine military as it could compete with the American Sabre F-86 and the Russian MIG-15. Aviation was considered to play a central, creative role in the industrial economic plans of Perón's government:

**To form the most sacred and most important of missions there is the art and technique of flying; an art that many see but few comprehend, because in flying, as with any other art, what is fundamental is the artist complemented by the elements that allow for the development of the genius of man, as a vital part of that art.<sup>1</sup>**



Biancuzzo and Santoro next to a real Pulqui jet fighter plane.



Fighter planes are among the most blatant and rich symbols of military power. In *Pulqui*, spectators are invited to share in the pleasure of rebuilding an iconic symbol of industrial achievement.<sup>2</sup> The documentary follows Daniel Santoro, a painter and sculptor, and Miguel Biancuzzo, a craftsman and theatre set designer, as they build the model (half the size of the original plane) over a five-month period—an effort to resurrect an artifact that represented the once-powerful rise of Argentina as an industrial player on the post-WWII geopolitical landscape. As the film advances steadily towards the final flight of the model, audiences are invited to consider the value of labor in a neoliberal Third World country that seems to favor financial speculation over investment in the education of a national labor force, and importing foreign products over protectionist policies.

From its title, one can tell that Fernández Mouján's fourth film *Pulqui: An Instant in a Country's Happiness* is about lost dreams. The film expresses the awkward and clumsy search for new forms of artistic expression in Argentina. The title of the film evokes a common feeling among Argentines these days; many maintain that they have to think back to Perón's first *Justicialista* government to recall any sense of a country progressing forward. *Pulqui*, which means 'arrow' in the indigenous language Mapuche, revisits a period of Argentine history when state propaganda emphasized the value of labor. The documentary clearly celebrates Peronism's politics of social inclusion but does not ingeniously embrace the movement's ideological principles. In its depiction of the way in which the protagonists resurrect symbolic artifacts with unconventional tools, the film prompts spectators to re-examine the past and think critically about the present.

Towards the beginning of the film, we see the Valentín Alsina Bridge. A vehicle crossing the Riachuelo River bears Santoro towards his friend's workshop. The bridge is an important political symbol for the history of Peronism, as it connects the city of Buenos Aires to its abandoned industrial belt. The bridge also serves as a symbolic frontier between the urban space capable of withstanding an economic crisis and the rest of the country. Accordingly, we see beat-up trucks loaded with cardboard making their way across the bridge, puffing smoke and transporting the waste of the middle and upper classes. The men that hang perilously from the sides of the trucks constitute a new class of workers commonly known as *cartoneros*, cardboard collectors.

A friend of Fernández Mouján once mused about the striking view from the bridge in the afternoon: "The day I saw it... I started to think that the Valentín Alsina Bridge was once an emblem of the Peronist labor movement, a place where all the large metallurgic industries were, entire neighborhoods constructed by Perón's government..."<sup>3</sup> The Alsina Bridge is a legendary site for Peronists for another reason, as well; it was one of the boundaries crossed in the October 17, 1945 mobilization to Plaza de Mayo to demand the release of Perón from prison. As Daniel James notes, with this protest march, workers subverted once and for all the notions of spatial hierarchy that had defined class relations in Argentina up to that point.<sup>4</sup> According to Fernández Mouján, during the Golden Age of Peronism, before the 1955 coup d'état, one would routinely see thousands of workers leav-

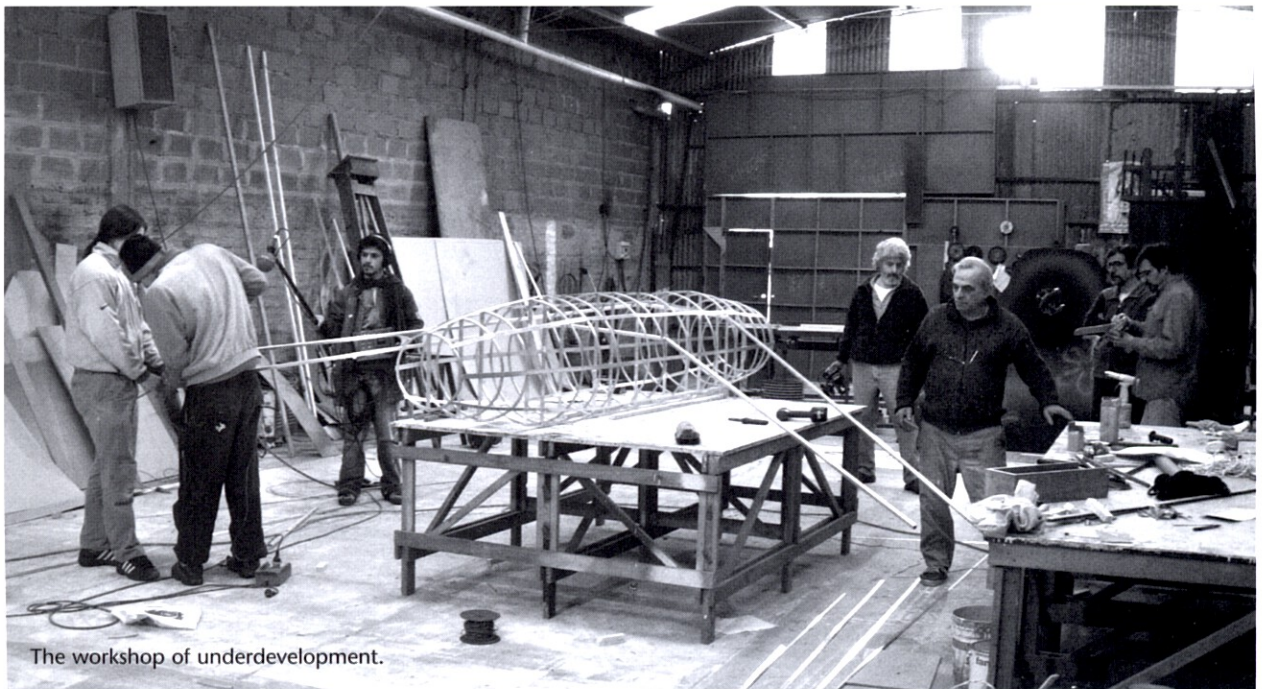
ing the factories like an ocean wave. These workers would not have become the *cartoneros* of today, he suggests, if the country hadn't fallen out of step with its industrial march. And yet he feels admiration for the *cartoneros*: "I admire how the people are able to recreate and organize solidarity ties and build an admirable structure of labor and survival."<sup>5</sup>

There are four main protagonists in *Pulqui*: plastic artist Daniel Santoro, craftsman and set designer Miguel Biancuzzo, *Pulqui* (the jet plane and its model), and the ghostly figure of Eva Perón. Santoro—painter, sinologist, set designer, inventor—is well known in Argentina for his playful renditions of Peronist iconography. Although Santoro was born a few years before the 1955 coup, he is fascinated by Perón's first years in office. His art, which appropriates and resignifies traditional Peronist images, is especially geared toward a contemporary Argentine public. He draws inspiration from the political propaganda that appeared in textbooks and posters during the General's first presidency. Susana Rosano argues that Perón was the first Argentine leader to develop a whole iconography for his political campaign that can be read today as a master narrative.<sup>6</sup> The master narrative targeted all ages; school books for children featured the illustrations of the saintly and protective figure of Evita, the spiritual leader of all school teachers and their pupils. As Mariano Plotkin argues in *Mañana es San Perón* (Tomorrow is Saint Perón), these texts more importantly "introduced new social actors and reformulated the traditional image of the role of the State".<sup>7</sup>

Miguel Biancuzzo is a different kind of artist and a different kind of Peronist than Santoro. He is an old-school craftsman from an age when it was still honorable to make something sturdy and functional. For years he has been building opera sets for Argentina's prestigious Colón Theatre in his workshop in Valentín Alsina, on the outskirts of Buenos Aires. He thinks of himself as a good craftsman and believes that his labor is an expression of his moral values. This is underscored in a sequence when Santoro, who often assumes the position of the interviewer in the film, asks him to describe the hammer he is using to shape a piece of aluminum into a ring for the nose of the model plane. Biancuzzo proudly explains that it is a double-face machinist hammer made by the Albacete Company in Spain. Eventually, when the Spanish and Italian hammer companies disappeared, he had to start making his own. Raising another hammer, he addresses Santoro and the camera: "These are made *in casa*... We were able to copy them pretty well. Maybe one day they will also become historic...but not today." He adds that he engraved the number 22 on the hammer. "Nobody knows why but you can draw your own conclusions." His works are a clear reference to August 22, 1951, the day hundreds of thousands of followers pleaded with Eva Perón to accept the vice-presidency of the *Justicialista* party.

Biancuzzo's workshop is straight out of the technical school tradition—*escuelas fábricas* as they are called in Argentina).<sup>8</sup> The workshop is a very large corrugated metal building that once held a replica of a locomotive he built for Leonardo Favio's film *Gatica: El Mono* (1993), the tragic story of a Peronist boxing







champion. Toward the beginning of *Pulqui*, the camera follows Santoro as he opens a large door with the letters VP ("Viva Perón") spray painted on the front. Biancuzzo's *taller* (workshop) is a space characterized by resourcefulness and talent, but on a deeper level it is a place where the unfinished process of mourning continues. In the *taller*, symbolic objects that carry a great deal of weight in the Argentine imaginary are excavated, reconstructed, analyzed, and revalued.

The absurd adventure of building a model of Pulqui stands for hundreds of other quixotic projects conceived in what I will call the "workshop of underdevelopment": an intermediary zone between First World industrial production and artisanal creation, typical of underdeveloped countries. The workshop of underdevelopment is both a symbolic space and the principal location in *Pulqui*, as most of the documentary's action takes place in Biancuzzo's *taller*. The protagonists go out of their way to explain the difficult choices they have to make in the construction and design of the model plane. They seem to want audiences to understand that there are risks to building such an object without the help of high-precision machinery.

*Pulqui* opens with its ghostly heroine. In a lyrical and moving fantasy sequence, Evita, dressed in a black business suit, and a school girl, wearing the traditional white apron used in public schools, are seated on a fallen tree in the forest. The ground is covered with leaves. Both have their backs turned to the camera. A ring of light shines around Evita's head. It is hard to hear what the two are saying over the natural sounds of the forest. The schoolgirl complains that they are giving her too much homework and then comments that she thinks Evita's blonde hair is beautiful. "I confess that I like yours more," Evita replies, caressing the girl's black hair. The scene ends abruptly and we are left alone in the middle of the forest. The sound of water and birds chirping becomes almost overbearing as the camera moves effortlessly among the trees. The image of the forest slowly dissolves into an archival image of the real Pulqui taking off as Perón, dressed in white uniform of the air force, watches. The jet engine roars as the sequence ends.

Evita's resurrected image in the forest offers relief. For Peronists, this sequence suggests comfort. The film's audiences know that the heroine of the story succumbed to cancer long ago just as they know about the desecration of her and her husband's corpses. Evita's body was preserved by the Spanish embalmer Dr. Pedro Ara, and both of the General's hands were cut off with a chainsaw when his mausoleum in the Chacarita Cemetery was broken into in 1987. A letter asking for a ransom of \$8 million dollars was subsequently sent to a few Peronist members of congress. Journalists David Cox and Damián Nabot in their book *La segunda muerte* (*Peron's Second Death*), suggest that this profanation was a ritualistic act to condemn Peron's spirit to eternal unrest. The bizarre incident remains unresolved but one thing has become clear: the Peronist political family has been constantly challenged in their efforts to mourn their leaders.<sup>9</sup>

Daniel James reminds us of the special "intimacy" that the *Justicialista* or Peronist movement was able to institute with the working class.<sup>10</sup> Evita played a crucial role in fostering this intimacy. Within the ideological arch of Peronism, Evita assumed the responsibilities of the perfect mother, her duties being both to protect and teach her children.<sup>11</sup> Her role is reinforced in the

film by the strategic placement of propaganda footage displaying the accomplishments of the Peronist government: the building of schools, recreation centers for orphan children, etc. This role as heroic guardian of the people assumes an even greater dimension in the documentary. For those who still believe (like Santoro, Biancuzzo and Fernández Mouján) that to work is to put into action one's intellectual and physical potential, and who think that work should compliment the needs of the community, Evita represents a steadfast symbol of redemption for the tradition of the state as guardian of the worker's craft.

The opening scene of the film reestablishes a lost connection between audiences and the heroine. As the film progresses, demands are made on the spectators to participate in a difficult archeological excavation of symbols. Santoro's paintings assume the role of the documentary voiceover in the film. Two works in particular illustrate the peculiar way in which the painter resignifies Evita. Both paintings depict Evita and the schoolgirl in a world of danger and salvation. In the first painting, which shows up about one third of the way into the documentary, Evita is standing tall but half of her face is in the shadow and her expression is that of someone in mourning. She holds the hand of a schoolgirl who has witnessed the violent usurpation of power by the Military Junta. Fernández Mouján juxtaposes newsreel footage with Santoro's painting in the film in order to illustrate not only the violence deployed during the coup — represented by shots of the burning government palace and a menacing flight of bombers — but also how young Argentines like himself retreated into fantasy to protect themselves from the trauma of events.

The second painting can be read as the representation of a place of refuge and salvation. In it, Evita and the schoolgirl float along a river sailing towards a magical city. The spectator learns in the third act of the film that this magical place is the City of Children, an entertainment park built by Evita. On the bank of the river, a winged animal rubs its skin against a tree. Along with shots of the painting we hear the sound of water running and birds chirping. The memory of Evita is transported from the real site of trauma, the bombed Plaza de Mayo and the Government Palace, to the tranquil landscape of the forest and river.

According to Plotkin, Peronist literature explains history not as a process but as a succession of cataclysms that redefined reality and can still be felt in the present. For Plotkin, this mechanism legitimized many policies in the symbolic plane "as it related contemporary events to replicas in an unquestioning past."<sup>12</sup> Santoro has not only been able to represent this mechanism in his work but has given it a more powerful dimension. He believes that most ideologies make a promise about what they can achieve in the future, but either they don't get a chance to put them into practice or their hopes are crushed by opposing forces: "Peronism, on the contrary is an ideology that lives in the past and holds a promise for the future. It is an ideology one wishes to come back to."<sup>13</sup> In the context of the film, his pictorial work seems to reflect the often forgotten factors that one should consider when thinking back on the significance of Peronism for the working class. These factors, as James reminds us, were "pride, self-respect and dignity."<sup>14</sup>

The style of the documentary positions the spectator in intimate contact with the protagonists in their working environ-



ments. Fernández Mouján shot *Pulqui* on video, assisted only by a sound person, and edited the film himself. The film's theme, particularly its emphasis on two workers and the relationship of their craft to an allegorical artifact, calls to mind Vittorio De Sica's classic neorealist films. Argentine film critic Eduardo Rojas says that one of the things that caught his attention in *Pulqui* was the mixture of manual, artisanal and artistic labor. He suggests that in the workshop both types seem to coexist, and further, that the protagonists of *Pulqui* derive their ethics and aesthetic from manual labor.<sup>15</sup>

Fernández Mouján's previous film *Espejo para cuando me pruebe el smoking* (2005) looks at the practice of artist-sculptor Ricardo Longhini and, in a similar vein, traces an artist's journey as he attempts to document art in the wake of Argentina's economic collapse. *Espejo*, like *Pulqui*, shows an artist attempting to make theory, as Longhini says in the film, coincide with the final product. On his way to the cinema, Longhini is caught in the middle of the protests of December 2001 when hundreds of people took to the streets to bring down De la Rúa's government. During the battle around Plaza de Mayo which left seven people dead, Longhini collected rubber pellets, grenade rings, political pamphlets and pieces of sidewalk that were used as ammunition. Longhini's work "Argentinitos: 20 de Diciembre, 2001" is crafted out of these remains. In the workshop of underdevelopment, the greatest task seems to be to discover how opposing elements can fit together to reveal their essential qualities. *Espejo* also shows the courage and dedication of an artist who struggles to sell his work in order to maintain his workshop and bring food to the table.<sup>16</sup>

The first act of *Pulqui* takes the spectator through the conceptual design of the model plane, the presentation of the blueprints, the careful selection of materials, and the construction of the resurrected object. In contrast to the original *Pulqui*, the reproduction will have no engine. This common project that brings Biancuzzo and Santoro together also provides the film's structure. According to the film's narrative premise, the reason for building the plane resides in Santoro's concept of "future archeology," an excavation of political signifiers that still have the capacity to articulate a vision for the nation:

**From my point of view, *Pulqui*, as a work of art, represents the desire to want to take off, that desire for Argentina once again to be a nation that can represent us, one that can fulfill our dreams. That is why these things are always related to the theme of happiness. And this also evokes that old country of happiness that Peronism embodied in its heyday.<sup>17</sup>**

Although the actual construction of the model plane took six months, watching the documentary, one gets the impression that it was completed in just a few frantic days. Santoro's confrontational presence gives *Pulqui* such a strong conceptual drive that at times he seems to be the film's director. He has a good feel for dramatic tension and pushes Biancuzzo to disagree with him in order to resolve the film's narrative turning points. As a result, Biancuzzo takes on the role of the honest and sometimes naïve craftsman who fights to preserve the set of principles that led him to accept Santoro's challenge in the first place. The con-

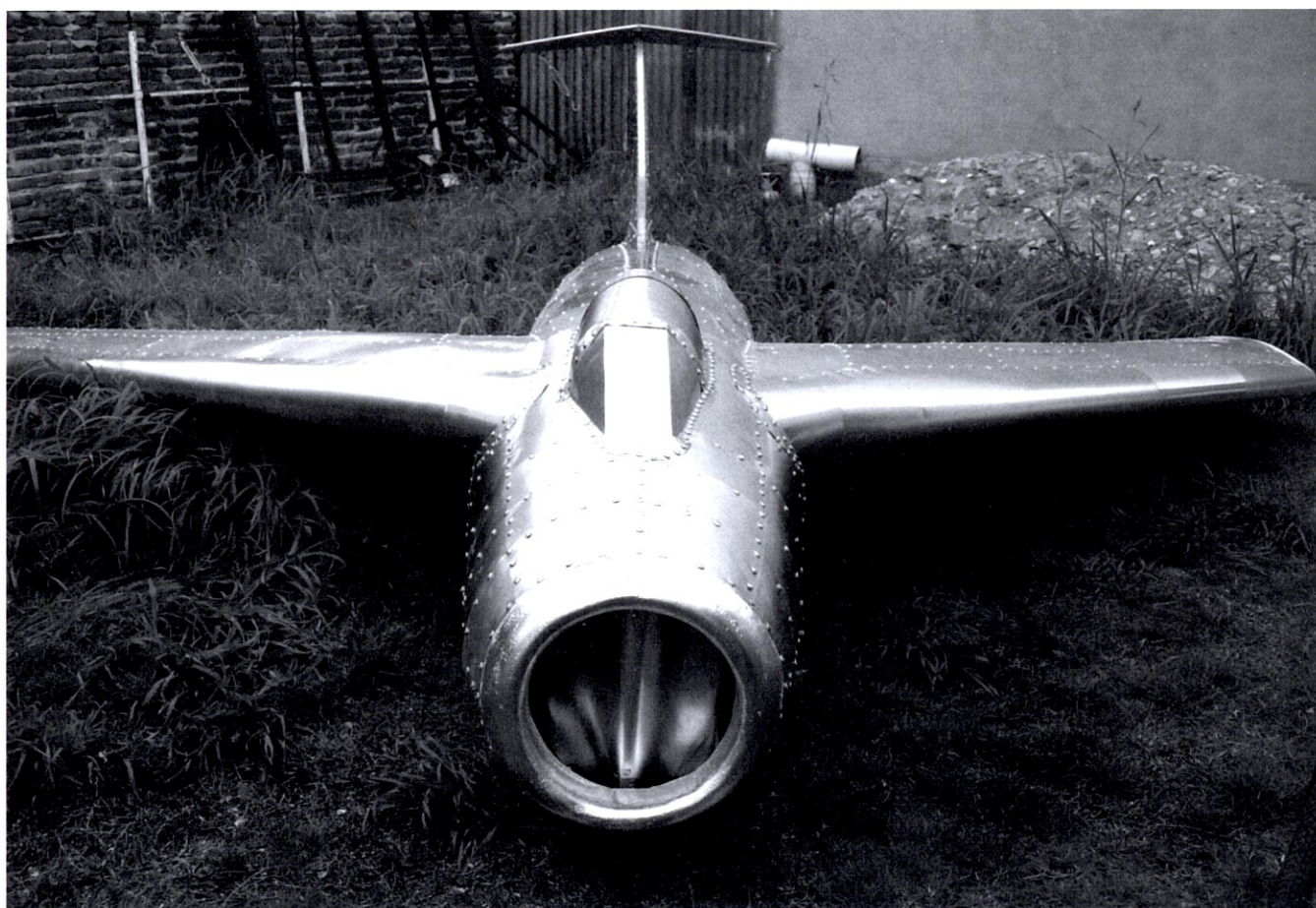
frontation between the two friends comes to a boiling point in the workshop when Biancuzzo complains to Santoro that he has been dishonest about the project's aspirations and calls him insatiable. First Santoro asked him to make a half-size model plane, then to make the model plane somehow fly. Finally, he wants the plane to land without being damaged so that it can later be displayed in a museum exposition. In order to convince his friend to keep working, he invokes a popular mantra typical of the workshop of underdevelopment: "*démosle para adelante*" ["let's keep on going"]. Biancuzzo echoes his friend's attitude: "...*vamos aprendiendo a medida que lo hagamos... no hay otra manera*" ["we will learn as we go.... there's no other way"]. This mantra suggests that the lack of tools or familiarity with the object to be built should not curtail someone's ambition, but it also implies that creativity among artisans does not depend on the sanction of an apathetic overseer. When Biancuzzo expresses concern that the plane will be damaged if they try to make it fly, Santoro reacts with amusement to his friend's sentimental attachment to the object: "Nobody is responsible if the toy breaks," he tells his friend. "We all break it."

Three quarters of the way into the film, Santoro and Biancuzzo take their project to an alley behind the workshop for a test flight. The model is mounted on a trailer and dragged along the improvised runway with the hope that it will somehow take to the air like a kite. The plane attempts to take off but tips and one of its wing scrapes against the asphalt, setting off sparks. Biancuzzo is terribly disappointed. Santoro, on the other hand is elated. The plane wanted to take fly, he explains, but it was restrained by the ties that secured it to the trailer. After this failed attempt, they head back to the workshop to rebuild the battered model.

Santoro picks the City of Children, a location rich in sentimental associations for Peronism, for the location of the second test flight. The City of Children is one of the largest amusement parks for children in Latin America in operation today. It was built with Evita's sponsorship in the 1950s on a golf course that belonged to Swift, an American meatpacking company. The buildings, partially inspired by medieval stories, and the Grimm fairy tales, were erected by 1600 workers. According to a few sources, including Santoro, Walt Disney visited the site and was inspired to build his park in the United States.<sup>18</sup> In sharp contrast to Disneyland/Disneyworld, the City of Children was designed as both an entertainment park and a place for civic instruction. Nestled in a grove of trees, its visitors find child-sized buildings representing the important institutions of democratic societies such as the House of Representatives, a school, a church and an airport. Once a year, children gather and hold a parliamentary session to suggest changes in local government legislation that might enhance their lives. The amusement park is often conceptualized as "a space that aids in education and the formation of citizens."<sup>19</sup>

The camera follows the model plane as it paraded through Buenos Aires on top of a truck bed, looking strangely because of its scaled-down size. When it arrives at the City of Children's minuscule airport, Biancuzzo complains that the runway is too short and that there are too many tree branches around that could damage the model plane. By contrast, for Santoro there is no other option than to attempt to fly the plane. An ellipsis interrupts the continuity of events and the spectator is preclud-





The model plane ready to fly.

ed from watching the take-off. Instead, we witness a discussion between the two protagonists as they examine a series of photographs of the take-off in which we see the model hovering a few feet off the ground trailing a mysterious cloud of smoke. Santoro is elated about what he sees as Pulqui's "desire to fly." He says: "it wanted to show us that it was a plane, not a kite. It wanted to take off. It's revenge from when it smashed itself against the ground."

In an interview, Biancuzzo reveals why he, on the other hand, was heartbroken and frustrated at this moment in the documentary film:

**For me the fact that the plane crashed was very disconcerting. Do you think that if we make another it would be same? It won't be the same because all the great things that this plane generated are exceptional because I'm not a plane engineer, I don't know how to make shit of these types of things. This came out because I did everything; I put all of myself into it. Everyone here seems to have a vision, but I don't think anybody remembers—I say this with a touch of irony—the guy who carried out the job.<sup>20</sup>**

Another confrontation between the two friends occurs when Santoro tells Biancuzzo that a section of the wing will have to be

removed in order to transport the plane in the most affordable freight crate to the Emilio Caraffa museum in Córdoba. Biancuzzo doesn't accept the idea of amputating 15% of the wing. He is proud of his manual work and demands respect for the integrity of the model plane. He doesn't seem to care that the plane will eventually become an art object in an exhibition. Santoro's cold reaction to his friend's concerns comes as a surprise, especially given the tragic history of physical desecration which haunts his work.

In his introduction to *Manual de un niño peronista* (Manual Of A Peronist Child), a book of Santoro's most celebrated paintings, Raúl Santana emphasizes that images of amputation and desecration haunt and resurface repeatedly in the artist's work:

**In his dream- fed up by voices, scraps, and evidence from said decade- Santoro viewed the huge territory of the Peronist's protectionist state. And he viewed it with his constructive sense, metaphoric architectures, violent and vertiginous perspectives, and even Peronism's black legend appeared with images full of irony. The tragedy was also present when the artist inquired into the destiny's mark that made an enigma out of the leader's corpses. The General's hands floated here. Evita's embalmed corpse disappeared there. The corpses, always the corpses. What did this world**



of amputation mean? What did the leaders' corpses have to do with history? Santoro seems to confirm that his imagination is also a way of knowledge.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, one would think that Santoro would identify with his friend's fears, especially when an esteemed Peronist object is targeted for amputation. In *Manual de un niño peronista*, Santoro himself attests to his proclivity to explore the dark side of *Justicialismo* and confront the tragic events that have shaped its history. Without exonerating Santoro for his manipulative strategies and his insensitivity, we can understand why he disagreed with Biancuzzo's refusal to amputate the plane's wing. For Santoro, the alternate symbolic life that the model plane will have after it leaves the workshop is more important than its precise physical integrity. The plane's ultimate purpose as an art object dominates the narrative thrust of the documentary from this point on.

In the final sequence of *Pulqui*, the camera takes to the air and flies over Buenos Aires' abandoned industrial belt. We hear engine noises and the sound of metal rumbling in the wind. Since its inception, it was obvious that because of its scaled down size the model plane could not have a pilot. The camera takes the place of a pilot, inviting spectators to mount the plane and join in the symbolic flight over the landscape of disaster capitalism. By the end of the film, Santoro and Biancuzzo have resurrected the Peronist flying machine, but the director has the last word. He insures that there is no sign of triumph in the model plane's first and last flight. Abandoned factories, a polluted river, a truck transporting a group of young men in its bed: what we survey from the sky is a nostalgic tour of what might have been. Fernández Mouján describes this sequence with bitterness:

**Pulqui's final flight over the ruins and the slums, and the cartoneros...for me that flight is the angel of history that is looking at the past with all its ruins, and what the angel wants is to raise the dead and awaken the great moments of times passed.<sup>22</sup>**

The word "utopia" suggests the ambition to attain what should be but cannot be realized. *Pulqui* espouses the idea that Peronism was a social project curtailed by the reactionary forces of the Argentine military and the right-wing liberals who, fearing the rise of a unionized working-class brought about the destruction of their labor practices. Biancuzzo, Santoro and Fernández Mouján, in bringing symbolic objects like the Pulqui and Evita back from the spectral world of the afterlife, present a heroic, albeit not always harmonious, intervention in the uncompleted bereavement process of the *Justicialista* project. Although there is a touch of nostalgia in their intervention, the act of recovery is full of creative optimism, exemplified by the forest sequence depicting Evita and the schoolgirl. The forest, in the context of Peronism's afterlife, is a refuge from the forces of destruction. Fernández Mouján visualizes the forest as a place where Pulqui rests after being mutilated and destroyed, until the two protagonists rescue it and make it fly once again.<sup>23</sup> As a trope in classic children stories, it also serves as a geographical nexus between childhood innocence and the broken dreams of adult lives; a place where sweet grandmothers turn into devour-

ing wolves. The *telos* of the documentary positions both Biancuzzo and Santoro as Quixotic heroes. Their heroism opposes with dignity the destructive forces of capitalism. As with Cervantes' Don Quixote, their stances seem pathetic and absurd from a First World, free-market perspective. But from within the discursive universe of the protectionist Peronist state, their actions make perfect sense. Biancuzzo and Santoro heroically conserve the last vestiges of craft heritage. These days, the First World may find itself in need of the Biancuzzos and Santoros of the Third World. It is yet unclear what types of tools will be needed to excavate and reconstruct in the ruins of disaster capitalism.

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## Notes

- 1 Juan Domingo Perón, *Selección de sus escritos, conferencias y discursos* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Síntesis, 1973): 189.
- 2 One could criticize the documentary for not making any reference to the ideologically suspicious engineers that collaborated in the design and construction of Pulqui I and II. At no point in the film do the protagonists or the director comment on this issue.
- 3 Pablo Croci, "Pulqui o el ángel de la historia," *El ángel exterminador*, July/August, 2007.
- 4 Daniel James, *Resistance and Integration: Peronism and the Argentine Working Class, 1946-1976* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988): 32.
- 5 Croci, 2.
- 6 Susana Rosano, "El paraíso perdido del peronismo, en clave hermética," *Universidad Nacional de Rosario*, 2007: 1. <http://www.unsam.edu.ar/home/material/rosano.pdf>.
- 7 Mariano Plotkin, *Mañana es San Perón: Propaganda, rituales políticos en el régimen peronista (1946-1955)* (Buenos Aires: Ariel, 1994): 180.
- 8 Peron's Constitution of 1949 articulated the guiding principles that strove to offer people the educational opportunity to join the national labor force. Juan José Hernández Arregui, a prominent Peronist intellectual who in the 1970s inspired a generation of young activists to accept *Justicialismo* as a path to socialism, acknowledges that the establishment of technical schools for working youth was among the most important economic policies of Peron's government. According to Hernández Arregui, this policy sought to establish economic independence by nationalizing different branches of the economy. See J.J. Hernández Arregui, *Peronismo y Socialismo* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Hachea, 1972): 216.
- 9 When Peron's body was relocated to the mausoleum in San Vicente in 2006, there were shootings among the crowd that had gathered to witness the burial.
- 10 James, 13.
- 11 See J.M. Taylor, *Eva Perón: The Myths of a Woman*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979): 92.
- 12 Plotkin, 195.
- 13 Daniel Santoro, *Manual de un niño peronista* (Buenos Aires: La Marca, 2002): 8.
- 14 James, 25.
- 15 Javier Porta Fouz and Eduardo Rojas, "Uno interiormente siempre es un artista," *El Amante*, July 2007.
- 16 In a very revealing scene, Longhini shows a faucet covered with duct tape and plumber's putty that he found in the building that he used as his workshop before he moved in. It is a surreal artifact; layer upon layer of putty and tape that could barely plug the holes of the rusting faucet—a perfect allegory of underdevelopment.
- 17 Oscar Ranzani, "Pulqui, objeto volador justicialista," *Página 12*, April 2007.
- 18 Suyay Benedetti, "La Ciudad de los Niños, un clásico," *Página 12*, August 2006.
- 19 Benedetti, 1.
- 20 Fouz and Rojas, 20.
- 21 Santana, 5.
- 22 Croci, 3.
- 23 Croci, 3.



# Sounds Like Canada

A REEXAMINATION OF THE DEVELOPMENT  
OF CANADIAN CINÉMA-VÉRITÉ

MICHAEL LONGFIELD

It is well known that within the kingdom of nonfiction film, the order of "direct documentary", regardless of genus (*cinéma-vérité*, Direct Cinema, Free Cinema, Candid Eye), did not emerge fully formed from the brow of any of its progenitors no matter how organic its evolution may appear in hindsight. It developed through a confluence of factors (technical, aesthetic, authorial) marshaled by filmmakers in France, the U.S., England, and Canada. Throughout the mid 50s and early 60s we see an exchange of ideas, equipment, and even personnel between these camps. Technology alone did not enable these films, and there is evident a large variation in terms of how the technology was deployed.

For example, in Canada, the National Film Board's federal mandate and funding opportunities, guided by producer Tom Daly's benevolent leadership at Unit B, created a unique kind of documentary laboratory. Daly, who had apprenticed with John Grierson and Stuart Legg at the Board during the war years, was a gifted film editor, and his years at the helm of Unit B offered those more ambitious or visionary filmmakers a strong sense of structure. Beyond the cinematic texts themselves, trouble-shooting new technical and aesthetic challenges offered unparalleled training to the filmmakers working under Daly, and those skills would be exported abroad. French director Jean Rouch perhaps not-so-famously credited his partnership with NFB director-cam-

*Pour la suite du monde (1963)*







*Lonely Boy* (1961)

eraman Michel Brault with creating *Chronique d'un été* (1961): "Everything that has been done in France in the field of *cinéma-vérité* comes from the NFB and from Brault."<sup>1</sup> Around the same time another NFB director-cameraman, Terrence Macartney-Filgate, quit the confines of Unit B to go the U.S. and join the Drew Associates. Macartney-Filgate worked with Robert Drew, Richard Leacock, D.A. Pennebaker and Albert Maysles shooting the first Direct Cinema feature, *Primary* (1960).

This is not to suggest that Canadians single-handedly "invented" *cinéma-vérité*. Rouch's comments may be as much indicative of his personal and professional generosity as a recognition of Brault's talent and input. Although Rouch was familiar with the NFB's output and was even something of an expert, he had considerable ethnographic documentary experience and had already made *The Human Pyramid* (1960) as a kind of test-run prior to his brief collaboration with Brault. And whatever Macartney-Filgate's contribution to *Primary*, and he claims it is substantial,<sup>2</sup> Drew had already been producing short-form news documentaries in the direct cinema style for American television. Back home at the NFB, Roman Kroiter credited earlier British Free Cinema documentaries, like Karel Reisz and Tony Richardson's *Momma Don't Allow* (1956), as fueling his own desires to make *vérité*.<sup>3</sup>

Yet what emerges is not a Utopian direct documentary movement, since we see that filmmakers immediately used the

emerging technologies and techniques to different ends. As has been well documented, back in the 60s the Americans saw themselves doing something quite distinct from their gallic brethren across the Atlantic. Charlie Michael provides a good, quick summary of the two camps' positions:

As the story goes, the American "direct cinema" of Drew and associates (first exemplified by *Primary*) strives to capture events without allowing the presence of the camera or the filmmaker to "distort the situation"... of real events on-screen. Conversely, the French *cinéma-vérité* of Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin, first exemplified by *Chronique d'un été*, confronts the invasive nature of the new equipment by actively signaling its presence on-screen with the filmmakers and their subjects.<sup>4</sup>

Thus the debate is framed around issues of authenticity, or which mode is more "real": not interfering (Direct Cinema) or acknowledging its presence (*cinéma vérité*). Michael notes how both Erik Barnouw and Bill Nichols' influential historiographies would help perpetuate these distinctions. For Nichols, there are two distinct modes of documentary filmmaking: "'observational' (direct cinema) and 'interactive' (*cinéma-vérité*)."<sup>5</sup> Certainly these are not static conceptions with iron-clad boundaries. Any



given direct documentary may veer from the observational towards the interactive. Or a documentary may become so interactive that it slides all the way out of the "interactive" and into what Nichols calls the "self-reflexive."<sup>6</sup> Given Nichols only outlines four modes of documentary ("expository", like the NFB wartime documentaries using the so-called "Voice-of-God" narration, is the last mode), the divide between *cinéma-vérité* and Direct Cinema is not inconsequential. Thus while the same technological advances more-or-less enabled both kinds of documentary filmmaking, they remain quite distinct.

Yet trying to parse these various subsections of direct documentary filmmaking has been the source of considerable critical consternation. No doubt the nomenclature is partly to blame. Almost all the terms are derivatives of Dziga-Vertov's *kino pravda* ("film-truth") and *kino glaz* ("film-eye"). And there was a tendency to use the terms interchangeably: some French films were sometimes called *cinéma direct* but almost never its literal English translation which was reserved for the American films. But the term *cinéma-vérité* took hold in English much like the contemporaneous spread of the *Auteur* Theory. Today the Drew Associates website has a tab at the top of the screen that reads "Cinema Verite." Clicking it yields an article that begins, "In 1960, when Robert Drew produced *Primary*, it was recognized as a breakthrough, the beginning of what came to be called 'Cinema Verite', in America."<sup>7</sup>

This "tale of two cinemas," so to speak, is further complicated by the Canadian context which frequently becomes lost in the shuffle. Charlie Michael goes on in his essay expressly to wrest the *Quebécois* direct documentary epic, *Pour la suite du monde*, from being a mere hybrid of the dominant schools: "Brian Winston has cleverly characterized the two poles of direct documentary as 'flies on the wall' (Drew) and 'flies in the soup' (Rouch). These metaphors may be correct, but as overall descriptions of nascent direct techniques, they miss out on at least one filmmaker whose innovative approach did not aspire to insect status in the first place."<sup>8</sup> Bruce Elder's essay, "Notes on the Candid-Eye Movement", remains one of the few systematic attempts to theoretically place the documentaries made by Unit B for (and around) the *Candid Eye* series (1958-59) within the direct documentary debate. These dozen or so short documentaries produced by Unit B, including *The Days Before Christmas* (1958), *Blood and Fire* (1958), *The Back-breaking Leaf* (1959), and the series send-off, *Lonely Boy* (1961), in many ways still represent the NFB's quintessential contribution to direct documentary.

Drawing on Stephen Mamber's book, *Cinema Verite in America*, Elder notes that the Canadian filmmakers following Henri Cartier-Bresson's quest for the "decisive moment" in the quotidian favoured an observational approach over what Mamber calls the "crisis-structure" dramatic frameworks of the American school of Robert Drew. Elder uncovers surprising ideological implications to what he characterises as the Candid Eye model. Having successfully distinguished it from the American Direct Cinema model, he suggests it belies a view of reality that "appears mystified and needing continually to be demystified."<sup>9</sup> The shadow of Peter Harcourt's seminal essay on Unit B from a decade earlier, "The Innocent Eye", looms large albeit unspoken. What Harcourt first praised as "a quality of suspended judgment, of something left open at the end, of something undecid-

ed,"<sup>10</sup> Elder paints Canadians as treating their own subjects from the vantage of an outsider. Elder likens this Candid Eye detachment to the alienated perspective of the colonized artist described by Franz Fanon. Elder writes,

**For this reason, that structure employed in the films of Drew Associates which depends upon a grasp of the homology between the dramatic form and the structure of conflicts which characterize the inner working of reality is not available to the colonized artist of this phase. His work is restricted to presenting merely the surfaces of reality. Thus what was claimed to be the result of a meritorious, willful detachment shows itself, on deeper study, to be a meretricious alienated lack of understanding. This sort of realism surely deserves the appellation it has sometimes been given—"naïve realism."**<sup>11</sup>

Even Unit B's use of ironic humour, best evidenced by *Lonely Boy*, is characteristic of this phase of colonized art. Elder would no doubt agree with Harcourt's assertion that there is "something very Canadian in all this."<sup>12</sup> Elder extrapolated his thesis into a book on the larger topic of Canadian cinema, *Image and Identity*, that shares the philosophical critique of realism throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Elder trumps the Canadian avant-garde led by Michael Snow and Jack Chambers as "our strongest cinema": "I argue, in essence, that this cinema does not attempt to present realistic illusions but rather inquires into the conditions of realistic representations."<sup>13</sup>

Whether one accepts Elder's conclusions,<sup>14</sup> it is not hard to understand why Canadian direct documentary would so often be marginalized or at best seen as a hybrid exception in this debate of American and French direct documentary. Certainly his approach is the minority position. The truth is that Canadian culture does not wield as much clout compared to France and America. Canadians, as Elder himself writes in *Image and Identity*, "have every reason to take pride in what we have produced, but to pretend that our culture flourished just as [America's] has is to ignore the reality of impoverishment ... It is to deny the reality of our oppression."<sup>15</sup>

Just as Elder was writing in the larger context of the post-structuralist critique of the philosophy of realism, the current resurgence of nonfiction film theory provides a new approach to the "fly-on-the-wall"/"fly-in-the-soup" debate. Carl Plantinga's *Rhetoric and Representation in Nonfiction Film* directly tackles the theoretical framework that helped inform Elder's analysis. Questions of realism are no longer what characterize the documentary in Plantinga's reconstruction. He writes, "Perhaps a clearer way to put it is to say that nonfictions assert a belief that objects, entities, states of affairs, events, or situations actually occur(red) or exist(ed) in the actual world as portrayed."<sup>16</sup> It is worth quoting at length:

**Note that this conception of the nonfiction film assumes no necessary realism or resemblance between the nonfiction work and actuality ... the moving photograph and recorded sound, under special circumstances, have a special status in relation to the record-**





ed scene, of an order different from a verbal description. However, this status is also common in the fiction film, and thus cannot distinguish nonfiction from fiction. My argument is that the fundamental comes via the *situation* of the film in its sociocultural milieu—its indexing and the spectator response this cues, and not according to an ostensible imitation or recording of the real.<sup>17</sup>

Questions of spectatorship thus become crucial. Most fiction films are a kind of record of actors playing a scene; what makes it fiction rather than nonfiction is how it's indexed by/for viewers rather than any truth claims of the record itself. Indexing is more than publicity. It is "a social phenomenon, as much determined by what audiences will accept as nonfiction or fiction as by the intentions of those who handle the film."<sup>18</sup> It is an interplay of assertion (filmmaker) and reception (spectator).

Certainly, when you centre the issue on documentary as a discourse, rather than on claims of access of reality (or the critique thereof), the debate between *cinéma-vérité* and Direct Cinema begins to dwindle in importance. In Plantinga's new categorization, they are both of the same "open voice" mode.<sup>19</sup> John Corner notes, "General truth claims in documentary cannot be seen to be fully grounded in primary fidelity [the relationship a between particular sound/image and element of profilmic reality] since fidelity underdetermines them, even within the particularly focused (sometimes, indeed, obsessed) project of *vérité*."<sup>20</sup> Like assertion in Plantinga's nonfiction film, documentary is foremost a mode of discourse for Corner: "So the

attempted reconstruction of documentary starts with the vulnerability of *documentary as record* and does not seek to remedy this. What it does seek to remedy is the nature of *documentary as a discursive practice*."<sup>21</sup> In practical terms what matters in any given documentary is the relationship between the primary level of sound and image and the secondary stage of their construction rather than any innate veracity of the images and sound. Too often these levels become conflated. Corner describes the danger: "Should the employment of the primary level be regarded as too heavily a function of secondary level discursive requirements, then there are problems of credibility *even though the primary veracity of the material remains undisputed*."<sup>22</sup>

Stressing the discursive nature of documentary is not to deny the differences between the American, French, and Canadian filmmakers. It is to bring these differences down from the level of ethics to the level of form and aesthetics. In the introduction to *Cinema Verite in America*, Mamber writes, "At its very simplest, cinema verite might be defined as a filming method employing hand-held cameras and live, synchronous sound."<sup>23</sup> Mamber notes this definition is obviously incomplete, because what matters is the interplay between technology and the filmmaking philosophy. If we treat direct documentary as a means—a tool—rather than an end—say, to not "distort the situation" as claimed Drew<sup>24</sup>—we need no longer tie ourselves in knots pitting the various strands of direct documentary against each other. Perhaps nowhere is this "means not an end" philosophy more evident than in the eclecticism at the NFB.

Much has already been written on the importance of Cartier-Bresson and his book, *The Decisive Moment*, in the development





Glenn Gould (Candid Eye, 1959)

of the *Candid Eye* series. Wolf Koenig stresses this influence was paramount: "Henri Cartier-Bresson ... Here was real life, as it happened, captured on film at the moment of greatest clarity and meaning. I showed the book to Roman, Tom and others, with the purpose of convincing them that we could do this kind of observation on film."<sup>25</sup> Yet arguably just as important as the inspiration of Cartier-Bresson was their reaction against the style of documentary being made at the NFB at the time. Roman Kroiter notes,

There was a series being made at the Board called *On the Spot* that was carefully scripted and, in my opinion, really dull. Wolf had taken a Bolex camera home with him. He did a little sequence on his father that was beautifully shot, like all of his stuff, and it became perfectly clear that you could just walk into a real situation and get some interesting images. Wolf was the guy who said we ought to make whole films in this manner.<sup>26</sup>

Yet while there's no denying the freshness of Koenig and Kroiter's filmmaking, *Candid Eye* would have a lot in common with *On the Spot*.

*On the Spot* was one of the first NFB documentary series edited specifically for television, with twenty-six episodes airing on the CBC from '53 until its replacement with *Perspective* in '56.<sup>27</sup> Each quarter-hour episode was introduced by a narrator who declares, "*On the Spot*, the National Film Board of Canada's up to the minute report of what's going on somewhere in Canada. This week and every week, NFB's camera crews are on the spot

where things are happening, recording the varied and colourful lives of Canadians."

*Radar Station* (Allen Stark, 1953), hosted by Squad Leader Bill Lee, is an early effort. Lee, holding a microphone and directly addressing the camera like a television news reporter, interviews the persons working at the radar station to provide viewers with an understanding of how the station operates. Much of the dialogue is wooden, possibly half-scripted, and the film's aims are clearly expository rather than dramatic—until an air-raid warning over the loudspeaker unexpectedly (to the viewer) "interrupts" Lee interviewing two female employees in the cafeteria. "Stick around and you'll see some action," says the Colonel. The film then cross-cuts between the various departments at the station we have already seen as the jets scramble to meet their target. If it was not clear before, it is now apparent that this is what Corner calls an *enactment*: "the production of an event precisely for the purpose of spectatorship."<sup>28</sup> It seems highly unlikely any location documentary crew would have enough cameras—at least four cameras by my count, not to mention dolly tracks and necessary sound equipment—to cover this scene as it is constructed. In the cinematic language before *vérité*, the filmmakers employ the language of Hollywood fiction to connote "real": carefully composed frames, smooth dolly shots, cross-cutting like a Griffith melodrama between the various points of foci—as the film abandons the reporter-on-the-scene style that preceded the scramble. Rather than leave the audience in suspense that we are under attack—or even worse that they have been the subject to the filmmakers' hoax—the bogies are revealed to be RCAF Lancasters. The camera pans over to Lee, who has apparently been waiting patiently off to the side despite the apparent threat of attack, "Well, it's a good thing they turned out to be friendly. This was just another in a series of test exercises..."

These scripted, dramatic sequences, or enactments to use Corner's term, were common in the *On the Spot* series. In another *On the Spot* documentary like *Football Story* (Bernard Devlin, 1953), our reporter Fred Davis is on a rooftop in downtown Edmonton speaking to the camera: "In this heart of western commerce, the clear-headed, cool-thinking pioneers of industry make the decisions that help shape our country's destiny." We then cut inside an office. An older boss-type gentleman in a dark suit is talking to his staff, until a shady character in a heavy coat and rumpled fedora comes in. The boss quickly kicks out his staff. "Have you got it?" the boss asks. "It'll cost ya," the guy replies. "Money's no object!" the boss insists. The guy then hands him two football tickets for that night's game. The film cuts back to Davis outside, now smiling, "As you can see Westerners take their football pretty seriously, and that's why football is our assignment for today." The film then cuts to the Edmonton Eskimos practicing on field, and Davis interviews their young head coach.

Unlike the air raid in *Radar Station*, one wonders if viewers were supposed to take that enactment as real. One suspects not, especially given Davis' chuckle. As we shall see, Davis serves an important role in guiding the viewer through the text. That goofy opening sequence aside (or the equally corny coda where two enthusiastic female fans mistake Davis for a football player), *Football Story* is actually ingeniously constructed. Davis' inter-





views are certainly scripted—or at least scripted in the sense that audiences have since become accustomed to watching late night talk shows like Carson and Letterman where shape of the interview, along with the answers, is discussed beforehand. (Davis seems always to know just what question to ask next to lead the film to its next sequence.) As head coach Darryl Royal discusses his “Split-T” formation offense, Davis asks him to clarify for non-experts like himself. Royal replies, “Well, I usually use a blackboard to explain it.” With a quick fade to black, we now see Royal in front of a blackboard talking to the camera showing the layout of the men on the field.<sup>29</sup> We cut back to the sidelines of the field with Davis, now speaking directly to the camera, “Now that you’ve seen the Split-T on the blackboard, let’s see how it works on the field.” Cut to a high shot above the field, and the scrimmage unfolds with the split-T in slow-motion. Cut back to Davis, who now tells us that we’ll see the same play at regular speed, and we cut to the same high angle and see the play unfold in a few quick seconds. What’s especially interesting is that Davis is looking offscreen to the side when we cut back to him, as if these plays are occurring right there within the diegesis and Davis is watching the slow-motion right there on the spot along with us.

Using Davis to create that kind of homogeneity is consistent

throughout the film. When Davis says now would be a good time to meet some of the players, we expect him to walk over and interview them like we had seen Bill Lee do with the personnel in *Radar Station*. Indeed he is walking off-camera when the film cuts. The film cuts to a montage of the various players, as Davis’ offscreen voice naming them and their position.

Sadly, most *On the Spot* episodes were not quite formally interesting as either of these films. (Kroiter’s ire is well placed. They are boring.) Another Devlin-Davis collaboration, *Vancouver’s Chinatown* (1953), is a rather plain series of interviews with members of Vancouver’s Chinese community. And after a clever opening, *Curtain Time in Ottawa* (1954) dissolves into an awkwardly earnest paean to repertory theatre (although those of a postmodern inclination might enjoy seeing “real” actors onscreen shifting back and forth between acting on the stage and acting “natural” in front of Devlin’s camera behind the scenes) and it shares with *Radar Station* a similarly climatic “crisis” as the repertory races to and fro backstage on what we are told is opening night (although more likely it is another enactment).

If the enactment-heavy *On the Spot* series works at all as documentary it is as discourse rather than as record. We do not need to believe that we are watching a real air raid (that the pri-



mary level of representation is capturing the pro-filmic reality of an air raid), we merely need to believe that this is (more or less) what happens at the radar station during an air raid (at the secondary level of discourse). On a practical level, however, one can understand Kroiter's criticism. Why bother with this scripted type of enactment at all if you are going to the effort of filming on location with sync sound?

Discussing the relationship between drama-documentary and *cinéma-vérité* in the history of British documentary, Corner notes that the impetus behind drama-documentary is in fact quite similar to *cinéma-vérité*. Corner argues that the use of dramatisation and enactment was prompted by "the need to produce documentary television about circumstances and processes which could not be filmed directly either because of the technical limitations."<sup>30</sup> Corner is specifically discussing what he calls "the story documentary mode," and the same impetus at play in *On the Spot*. Yet if we go back to Mamber's first (admittedly flawed) definition of *cinéma-vérité* ("verite might be defined as a filming method employing hand-held cameras and live, synchronous sound"), the clunky *On the Spot* series is more *vérité*—shot on location using live, sync sound—than the contemporaneous "proto-*vérité*" made over at the other end of the Film Board at Unit B.

On a philosophical level, Roman Kroiter and Colin Low were not averse to enactment. Both were merely more much skillful in its deployment. Perhaps this was a result of the culture at Unit B. Low had been an animator prior to his jump to live-action filmmaking, as had been Wolf Koenig. They all certainly benefited from Tom Daly, who had learned to skillfully blend disparate newsreel footage and sound effects into a coherent visual essay during the wartime years. D.B. Jones notes how Daly would go so far during his apprenticeship to stage footage of a German officer studying "luftwaffe aerial photographs" with an NFB secretary in the role because he lacked the necessary newsreel footage to complete a sequence.<sup>31</sup> This same willingness is evident in the films of Unit B.

Richard Hancox traces the evolution of Kroiter's second directing assignment, a piece for the NFB series *Faces of Canada* (1952-54), as one moving away from Zöe Druick's notion of "governmentality" towards seeking "aesthetic solutions for conveying his subject's character ... and the film's working title, *The Switchman*, was dropped in favour of the switchman's actual name."<sup>32</sup> *Paul Tomkowicz: Street-railway Switchman* (1954) is still regarded as a NFB classic. Peter Evans writes,

**it is the 9-minute story of a Polish immigrant whose mundane job maintaining Winnipeg streetcar switches in the dead of night becomes a gorgeous study of contrasts in black and white, washed in an audioscope of authentic street sounds. The voice-over technique underscores the wordlessness of the on-screen people and Tomkowicz's alienation in the midst of a bustling urban winter vista.<sup>33</sup>**

Evans notes the voice-over is actually that of an actor (albeit speaking Tomkowicz's words), but Hancox's research suggests the extend to which Kroiter and Stanley Jackson reshaped Tomkowicz's original interview for the actor was greater than

previously suggested.<sup>34</sup>

It tempting to look at *Paul Tomkowicz* as proto-*Candid Eye*: Kroiter's own elevated role in the movement, the location shooting, the use of handheld camera work, an observational style, the intimate feel. What becomes apparent on closer inspection is just how carefully constructed the film is: a carefully chosen subject, carefully framed (and possibly enacted) shots, an actor's voice speaking as the voice of Tomkowicz. Even the intimacy of much the result of the use of POV through classical shot-reverse shot construction, the sort of thing that would be logistically impossible on a single-camera observational film. Yet it is perhaps Kroiter's aesthetic solutions to the technical limitations (little location sound, garbled voice-over, inexperienced crew), in short how he shapes his discourse, that perhaps aligns it with *Candid Eye*.

It is curious that Elder specifically singles out *Tomkowicz* and Colin Low's *The Circle of the Sun* (1961) as two of the "many lyrical, personal documentaries" at the NFB that "exploited features specific to the photograph" because what links both films to me is their lack of synchronous dialogue and unconventional use of narration.<sup>35</sup> (It may be this lack that highlights their nature.) *The Circle of the Sun* relies on narrator Stanley Jackson's steady cadence for its thrust, but like *Tomkowicz* uses a recurrent voice-over of its erstwhile protagonist, a young native man who is an outsider of his own dying culture. Like *Tomkowicz*, this gives an existential bent to the dialogue and by extension the entire film that might not be present had it been delivered in a typical talking head interview. Something similar also occurs in the Koenig-Low-Kroiter collaboration *City of Gold* (1954), as Pierre Burton's voice narrates his memories (like *Tomkowicz*, heavily re-written by Stanley Jackson) of the Yukon gold rush over the gliding glass-plate photographs of the era.

Elder's point underlines the tendency to take sound for granted. Rick Altman would almost certainly agree. In *Sound Theory/Sound Practice* he writes, "'Direct' sound, for example, has been treated by people who should know better as an unmediated form of film sound recording, as if a preference for sync recording of location sound could possibly circumvent the mediation implicit in the choice of a particular microphone, location, or volume level."<sup>36</sup> The importance of sound and sound technology in *Candid Eye* is not inconsequential.

By the mid 50s, the advances in portable film cameras were well ahead of those in portable sync sound equipment. By late 1958 when Unit B was about to shoot *The Days Before Christmas*, the latest in single-system sync sound cameras, the Auricon, was too unwieldy (weighing over 25kg) except when sync was vital, and much of the film was shot using the old, non-sync Arriflex cameras.<sup>37</sup> Non-sync sound could be edited into the picture the same way as had been done before. Koenig recalls, "The sound recordist picked up a lot of ambient sound and, with careful picture and sound-editing, we got it to look as if the material was in sync, an editor's trick from the earlier documentary days. You know, the guy talking on the phone, shot so that you couldn't see his mouth move and editing his voice over the picture."<sup>38</sup> Jeffrey Ruoff further notes that while the use of sound in documentary is indeed a convention, these kind of "betrayals" of the conventions of synchronous sound recording are common, yet often go undetected, even in *vérité*.<sup>39</sup>





*La lutte* (1961)

In comparison, the staid style of most *On the Spot* episodes was perhaps the victim of its attempts at authenticity. The interviewer speaking in sync on location on camera, even if the interviews were more or less scripted, signified their authenticity. And if sound was often tethered to the interviewer in *On the Spot*, it is no wonder: prior to 1955 the standard sound-recording system was the Westrex which weighed over 160 kg.<sup>40</sup> Indeed the success of *Candid Eye* is likely attributable to filmmakers who had proven themselves capable of dynamic location shooting by eschewing sync until a relatively late point.

After its extremely free-form debut with *The Days Before Christmas*, the next *Candid Eye* shorts owe considerably to the reportage style of *On the Spot* and later *Perspective*. They just had the advantage of being able relying on the voice of Stanley Jackson, rather than some on-screen narrator, to help guide the viewer through the text. This enabled a certain freedom as to when to use the Arriflex to capture looser, spontaneous images in the quest for that “decisive moment”, and the Auricon for talking-head interviews on location or sequences that demanded the use of sync. Indeed one could argue that *Candid Eye* was not just eschewing the enactments of *On the Spot*, but taking its narrator off the street and putting him back behind the camera where he belongs (at least according to NFB tradition). We see this in Macartney-Filgate’s *Blood and Fire*, shot by Koenig, opening on images of the pomp and circumstance of the Salvation Army with Jackson’s narration serving the same role as Bill Lee or Fred Davis did on the spot. When Macartney-Filgate and Koenig interview the Army officers, they remain off camera, but they still rely on interviews—not an inconsequential decision in light of how the Americans would use the portable sound and camera equip-

ment. Most interesting is the climax of *Blood and Fire*, which features not a trumped-up air raid or the supposed mad scrambled on opening night, but a group of men down on their luck hoping to find a bit of salvation. One could question the ethics of the scene: did the camera influence them? Or perhaps we are witnessing moments too intimately private that perhaps the film is exploitative? But within the film’s discourse, there is no denying its impact beyond anything dreamed possible in *On the Spot*.

As a final thought, it is worth mentioning the French-Canadian direct documentary movement as a comparison. While Brault was instrumental in helping shoot the early *Candid Eye* films, he quickly took to making his own films in French. Consider Michael’s typical description of the development of direct documentary style in the NFB’s then-burgeoning French unit: “Hand-held cameras and synch sound, affectionately known to French Canadians as *le direct*, quickly became more than just mere windows on reality—they were a cinematic equivalent of their cultural ‘Québecitude.’”<sup>41</sup> *Le direct*? Certainly not sound. The two shorts he mentions, *Les raquetteurs* (1958) and *La lutte* (1961), two mini-masterpieces co-directed and shot by Michel Brault, employ only a smattering of direct sync sound at best. There’s certainly little evidence of sync in Brault and Gilles Groulx’s *Les raquetteurs*. A close reading of the film’s soundtrack appears that it is entirely constructed of wild sound carefully edited to appear sync. Or conversely when people standing close to the camera appear to be speaking, but the soundtrack is instead awash with a multitude of indirect, indeterminate voices. In *La lutte*, Brault, Claude Jutra, and Marcel Carrière have more tricks at their disposal: a montage of fighters is set to a harpsichord sonata, and the climatic fights are all nar-



rated by a would-be radio or television announcer. Only in the end sequence, in the more controlled environment of the locker room, do we see people speaking clearly in sync.<sup>42</sup>

Did Brault and his crew have access to the same Auricon system as his compatriots? Did the French unit have the same financial advantage and clout of Daly's Unit B?<sup>43</sup> Or are the demands for real sync sound on display in *Candid Eye* intentionally subjugated to not tether Brault's prowling, obsessive gaze? These early Brault shorts appear to favour wide-angle, close-ups whenever possible. Brault's camera is handheld and very fluid, and recording true sync sound given Brault's 360 degree mobility would have been a considerable technical challenge (and soundman Carrière had already proven himself capable of effectively using wild sound to appear sync in the *Candid Eye* shorts). The *Candid Eye* films on the other hand appear to use a mix of hand-held and tripod-mounted camerawork, and considerable more reliance on zoom lenses. Not surprisingly the use of steadying tripods appears to dominate the scenes that are sync (presumably shot using the Auricon), as opposed to handheld wild-sound sequences. One might be tempted to suggest that perhaps Brault's work with *Candid Eye* was shooting with the Arriflex, and thus that's what he would use on his own filmmaking. This is an interesting suggestion, but it would be a mistake to take it too far. One wonders whether the heavy reliance on dubbing common to francophone audiences diminished for Brault the need for true sync if it meant encumbering his camera. By the time of Brault's collaboration with author-poet Pierre Perrault on *Pour la suite du monde* (1963) words and clearly seeing the voice of the speaker take on a greater importance. Certainly this is no doubt Perrault's influence, whose own background included radio documentaries prior to his foray into filmmaking. Fortunately, the relatively small and portable Nagra-Eclair sync sound package had by then been perfected.

Certainly, there remains much work to be done especially in regards to the use and development of sound. Viewing documentary as a discursive practice, however, clearly enables us to reengage with issues how technology is used at those primary and secondary levels, rather than a circular dialogue of the ethics of form. It is only when we understand how these levels work together can we begin to make meaningful criticism of documentary.

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## Notes

- 1 "Tout ce que nous avons fait en France dans le domaine du cinéma-vérité vient de l'ONF et de Brault" (Trans. Krista Darin). See Eric Rohmer and Louis Marcorelles, "Entretien Avec Jean Rouch," *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 24.144 (1963): 17. Rouch also talks at length and in great detail about Unit B and its offshoot development of a *voix québécoise* that, in his opinion, would ultimately transcend it with *Pour la suite du monde* (1963).
- 2 Sarah Jennings, "An Interview with Terence Macartney-Filgate," *Canadian Film Reader*, ed. Seth Feldman and Joyce Nelson (Toronto: Peter Martin, 1977) 81.
- 3 "Roman Kroiter: Master Filmmaker and Technical Wizard," *Take One* 10.32 (2001): 23.
- 4 Charlie Michael, "Claiming a Style: The 'Living Cinema' of Pierre Perrault's *Pour La Suite Du Monde*," *The Velvet Light Trap* 54 (2004): 32-33.
- 5 Ibid., 33.
- 6 Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*

- (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991), 33.
- 7 "The Making of the Cinema Verité in American Film," *Drew Associates*, 1992, 12 Dec 2006 <<http://www.drewassociates.net/Main/verite.htm>>.
- 8 Michael, 46.
- 9 Bruce Elder, "On the Candid Eye Movement," *Canadian Film Reader* ed. Seth Feldman and Joyce Nelson (Toronto: Peter Martin, 1977) 93.
- 10 Peter Harcourt, "The Innocent Eye," *Canadian Film Reader*, ed. Seth Feldman and Joyce Nelson (Toronto: Peter Martin, 1977) 72.
- 11 Elder, "Candid Eye" 94.
- 12 Ibid., 72.
- 13 Bruce Elder, *Image and Identity: Reflections on Canadian Film and Culture* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 1989) 7.
- 14 Testing Elder's thesis of *Candid Eye* against French *cinéma-vérité*, unmentioned in Elder's essay or its elaborations in his book, could be an interesting avenue of future study. Indeed Jane Gaines' comments on *Lonely Boy* certainly call to mind the ethnographer Rouch: "There is something in *Lonely Boy* that is reminiscent of the incredulity of the traditional anthropologist studying the other-cultural phenomenon of scarification rituals or fire-walking, with the difference here the subject is nothing more than screaming, love-struck teenagers, ordinary girls-next-door." See Jane Gaines, "Lonely Boy and the Verité of Sexuality," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 8.1 (1999): 104.
- 15 Elder, *Image and Identity* 14.
- 16 Carl Plantinga, *Rhetoric and Representation in Nonfiction Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997) 18.
- 17 Ibid., 18-19.
- 18 Ibid., 21. Hybridity is still possible, since fiction and nonfiction become what George Lakoff calls "fuzzy sets." Indeed a happy corollary of Plantinga's conceptualization is how it helps give a framework to define the elusive pleasures of Jean-Luc Godard's filmmaking in the late 60s which often deliberately seems a kind of documentary of actors in front of a camera making a work of fiction.
- 19 Ibid., 115-9.
- 20 John Corner, *The Art of Record: A Critical Introduction to Documentary* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1996) 18.
- 21 Ibid., 25.
- 22 Ibid., 18.
- 23 Stephen Mamber, *Cinema Verite in America: Studies in Uncontrolled Documentary* (Cambridge: MIT, 1974) 1.
- 24 Michael, 33.
- 25 Tammy Stone, "Candid Eye, Lonely Boy & Unit B: Take One's Interview with Wolf Koenig," *Take One* 11.37 (2002): 36.
- 26 "Kroiter," 23.
- 27 Gary Evans, *In the National Interest: A Chronicle of the National Film Board of Canada from 1949 to 1989* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1991) 26-7.
- 28 Corner, 32.
- 29 The NFB certainly caught them at the right time on the cusp of greatness. Half-back Billy Vessells would go on to be the first Eskimo to win the league's Most Outstanding Player Award that year. Royal himself left the team after the season, and Royal's replacement, Frank "Pop" Ivy, would immediately lead the squad to 3-consecutive Grey Cup championships. And it would be Ivy who history would popularise for pioneering the "Split-T." See "Pop Ivy," *Wikipedia*, 26 Nov 2006, 12 Dec 2006 <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pop\\_Ivy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pop_Ivy)>.
- 30 Corner, 35.
- 31 D.B. Jones, *The Best Butler in the Business: Tom Daly of the National Film Board of Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1996) 36-7.
- 32 Richard Hancox, "Geography and Myth in Paul Tomkowicz: Coordinates of National Identity," *Candid Eyes: Essays on Canadian Documentaries*, Jim Leach and Jeannette Sloniowski, ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2003) 20.
- 33 Evans, 32.
- 34 Hancox, 13-4.
- 35 Elder, *Image* 3.
- 36 Rick Altman, "Sound's Dark Corner," *Sound Theory/Sound Practice* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 173.
- 37 See Evans, 71 and Seth Feldman, "The Days Before Christmas and the Days before That," *Candid Eyes: Essays on Canadian Documentaries*, Jim Leach and Jeannette Sloniowski, ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2003) 39.
- 38 Stone, 37.
- 39 Jeffrey Ruoff, "Conventions of Sound in Documentary," *Sound Theory/Sound Practice* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 233.
- 40 Evans, 71.
- 41 Michael, 35.
- 42 For those still unconvinced of Brault's early reliance on wild sound, compare these two titles to the documentary he made the following year about hearing impaired children, *Les enfants du silence* (1962), also with Carrière and Jutra. And unlike the two previous films, much of the film appears to have been shot on a tripod.



# The War on Film

REANIMATING THE POST-9/11 VIEWER IN  
*THE PRISONER, OR: HOW I PLANNED TO KILL TONY BLAIR*

BRIAN GIBSON

*"We have done nothing....Yes, you see that in the camera."*  
 —Yunis Khatayer Abbas

The war in Iraq, officially launched in March 2003, has become the most filmed war in cinema's 114-year history. In its first six years, there have been news photos and footage, videorecordings of hostages and their executions, civilian-shot images, Army photos and images of air-strikes and other attacks, leaked photos and video-camera recordings of prisoner humiliation and abuse in Abu Ghraib, documentary films, and feature films.<sup>1</sup>

The audience for those films about the war, at least those shown at theatres or released on DVD, has been remarkably small. Even this paper's focus, the documentary *The Prisoner, Or: How I Planned To Kill Tony Blair* (2006-07)<sup>2</sup>, although it followed the directors' critically-acclaimed *Gunner Palace* (2005), saw limited release in the United States and in Canada, only coming out on DVD in many cities; the directors' third Iraq war documentary, *Bulletproof Salesman* (2008), has not yet even been picked up for distribution in North America. Not only did polls find that, two years after the horrific photos were released, in "the summer of 2006... a majority of respondents hadn't heard of Abu Ghraib," but in cineplexes or rental stores, "given opportunities to see more of the war... American audiences appear markedly averse."<sup>3</sup> Critics have focussed on an American, even North American (Canadian soldiers have been in Afghanistan since 2002), audience that hasn't been willing to watch the war through a film lens. But what if that is because they have been so used to watching war through a camera all along?

## SETTING THE STAGE:

### FROM FALLING TOWERS TO HUMAN PYRAMIDS

Jeff Birnbaum, a company president and a former fire chief and emergency medical technician, remembers what he saw on September 11, 2001 because of what "he says seems almost like a 'videotape in my head':"<sup>4</sup>

The sight was amazing. I was just totally awestruck.... I have seen plenty of death in my life, and burned bodies and so forth, but this was incredible.... [Near the South Tower,] I stood there for a second in total awe, and then said, 'What the F[uck]?' I honestly thought it was Hollywood.

Birnbaum later cried at images of death on TV, was plagued by nightmares, and talked to a priest at a counseling center. But his initial reaction was a kind of "whoa! cool!" sense of awe, and he felt what he saw did not just resemble a movie, but *was* a movie. Then there is the memory of Lakshman Achuthan, who escaped from Tower 1, as reported in *The New York Times* the next day: "I looked over my shoulder and saw the United Airlines plane coming. It came over the Statute [sic] of Liberty. It was just like a movie."<sup>5</sup> The collapse of the towers and killing of thousands may have been "unthinkable," as the article's headline puts it, even unimaginable, but it was not, apparently, uncinematic. Cinema replaces the imagination here, the mind's eye and memory become cameras, and New York City is the screen onto which a disaster- or war-film is projected. Movies provided the precedent, especially three years earlier, when *Armageddon* (1998; dir. Michael Bay) showed meteors striking the World Trade Center. And most people saw the planes strike the towers on TV, over and over, in slow-motion replays, on all kinds of networks (I first caught the horrible news on MuchMusic). Bill Schaffer notes, "Viewers around the world found themselves cast in the role of real-time witnesses" with one Australian TV network miniaturizing the "moment of impact" "as a small animated icon permanently displayed in the corner of the screen, automatically resetting itself at the end of each momentary cycle"<sup>6</sup>; did this repetition numb viewers, creating a kind of atrocity boredom?

Five years later, then, the stage seemed largely set for a wide non-response to the Abu Ghraib photographs. Far from a massive event likened to a blockbuster movie, unfolding in recorded time that could be rewound, slowed down, and paused, the already frozen photographs seemed like small, amateur-ish snapshots (there were some videorecordings, as noted by reporter Seymour Hersh in an interview and June 2007 *New Yorker* article, but these received little mention and most were not released). The photos were obviously set-up, the camera like a weapon participating in the humiliation and abuse, and the soldiers all-too-knowing actors; here was choreographed tragedy, not a real-time glimpse of sudden horror. After all, didn't the prisoner, infamously photographed with a hood on and hooked up to electrodes, seem to be in an "obviously contrived and theatrical" pose, "a deliberate invention" for the camera?<sup>7</sup> Many would not need to imagine what it was like for this man





not only because they cannot see his face but because there is no sense he is in serious danger—it is all “a scene staged for the camera”. The pictures seem somehow unreal, with the abundance of photos making the abuse and humiliation seem more fragmented, diffuse, and murky, nothing like the two crisp, clear, almost concrete images, replayed over and over, “awesome” in their scale and effect, of two airplanes crashing into and bringing down two landmark, seemingly indestructible buildings. The symbolism is much more potent, too—phallic symbols of modern architecture and Western financial power are toppled by feats of aeronautic engineering.

Both events were immediately differentiated by the American government, the September 11 attacks quickly classified a war—not a criminal act—connected with a vast and shadowy network of jihadists, launching two military invasions in response, while the Abu Ghraib photographs were labeled breaches of military conduct and quickly connected to a few bad low-ranking soldiers in the prison—no person ranking above staff sergeant was convicted and “No one has ever been charged for abuses at the prison that were not photographed”—who could be seen in the images. As Susan Sontag pointed out, the Bush “administration’s initial response was to say that the president was shocked and disgusted by the photographs—as if the fault or horror lay in the images, not in what they depict”<sup>8</sup>; the problem of whether or not the torture was “systematic” and based on government “policies” (“Regarding the Torture of Others”) was, as Sontag points out, ignored. Specialist Ben Thompson, a key figure in *The Prisoner*, has said that the photographs became diversionary and remarked in a 2008 interview, “the culture and the political reality that turned Abu Ghraib into a concentration camp was never addressed.”<sup>9</sup>

Both events were mediated and distanced by the camera, connected with *them* and so the photos were not seen as “us”.<sup>10</sup> And even if viewers were variously enthralled, horrified, fascinated, or repulsed, if they were watching on a screen, they were removed and safe, as in a theatre (all the more reason, perhaps, to support those over there, in danger). And theatres are where, especially since World War II, we have become used to seeing “war.”

As Lawrence Weschler has explained, following ex-Marine and First Gulf War chronicler Antony Swofford’s point, Marines pump themselves up by watching war films, avidly following

the battle scenes, and they can quote countless lines from them: “‘There is talk,’ Swofford noted [in *Jarhead*], ‘that many Vietnam films are antiwar... But actually, Vietnam films are all pro-war [for the soldier], no matter what the supposed message, what Kubrick or Coppola or Stone intended.’”<sup>11</sup> Weschler wonders if the “(mediumless) medium of cinema is simply incapable of projecting such measured and tentative reconsiderations” of war.

War photographs and other “[i]mages of dead civilians” can “quicken hatred of the foe,”<sup>12</sup> as the Abu Ghraib images must have for those groups already fighting American soldiers in Afghanistan and Iraq, but for the American public, the images did not seem to inspire substantial indignation, shame, guilt, or self-examination.<sup>13</sup> As Sontag predicted in May 2004, shortly after some of the photographs were shown (though many, many more were apparently not shown or published), “it will increasingly be thought unpatriotic to disseminate the new photographs and further tarnish the image of America”. If anything, perhaps, the photographs removed the war further from Americans’ sense of reality—here was a strange, unreal, posed, decidedly un-American and foreign show being enacted far away.

Documentaries and feature films about Iraq, then, often face a two-headed problem—how to supersede the “real” images of pain and suffering that have already little swayed the majority of the American public, while also avoiding any pornographic glorification of war for the minority going off to fight? And if the soldiers who cheer at Coppola’s movie at the Twentynine Palms<sup>14</sup> base theatre in the film adaptation of *Jarhead* do so in a scene where, as the film’s screenwriter (and ex-Marine) Bill Broyles Jr. explains, the theatre’s “screen in this context is both preparing them and shielding them”, a viewer not going overseas to fight will likely only feel that, ultimately, the screen is shielding him or her from reality. Yet is the difference between soldiers in a war and viewers of a documentary or feature about a war more a matter of degree than participation?

The prisoner in the most infamous photo leaked from Abu Ghraib, where he is standing on a chair and has been told that, if he steps off, he will be electrocuted to death (the person who told him this, Sabrina Harman, says “she wasn’t sure if he believed her threat and “‘He was laughing at us towards the end of the night’”),<sup>16</sup> was nicknamed “Gilligan” by soldiers in Abu



Ghraib's 372nd Military Police Company. Another was "sometimes called Mr. Burns, after the scrawny villain on 'The Simpsons'"<sup>17</sup>. Sergeant Javal Davis recalled Abu Ghraib as looking "[l]ike something from a Mad Max movie"<sup>18</sup> and said, "'Everyone in theatre had a digital camera... That was nothing, like in Vietnam where guys were taking pictures of the dead guy with a cigarette in his mouth.'" Here, he may be further muddling reality and film—in *Full Metal Jacket* (1987; dir. Stanley Kubrick), one soldier lifts a seemingly sleeping man's hat to reveal an enemy corpse for a photographer to shoot. Art and life and war swirl together in memory.

As Gourevitch and Morris point out, "The nicknames made the prisoners both more familiar and more like cartoon characters, which kept them comfortably unreal when it was time to mete out punishment." The soldiers, stuck in a foreign prison being mortared and in a job without clear operating procedures and no luxuries, mimicked their comfortable unreality, projected it onto their prisoners in order to externalize and lessen their own suffering, setting up a controlled posing in the theatre of war—the Abu Ghraib photos are like a series of tourist souvenirs of how to humiliate the enemy; indeed, on many of the digital photocards, they were scattered among sightseeing photos of Iraq.

Sabrina Harman, who took many of the pictures in part, she says, to expose what was being done, also "liked to look," even writing to her father from Iraq, "On June 23 I saw my first dead body I took pictures! The other day I heard my first grenade go off. Fun!"<sup>19</sup>. The same kind of awe in Jeff Birnbaum's eyewitness recollection of September 11 is echoed here. It is an awe—perhaps borne of Hollywood blockbusters, video-game scenarios, and computer graphics—that makes no sense precisely because it does not consider context. The sight itself is cool, regardless of its situation or reality. Harman would give a thumbs-up pose in any picture: "bathing in an inflatable wading pool;... mounting the ancient stone lion of Babylon at the ruins of King Nebuchadnezzar's city; leaning over the shoulder of an M.P. buddy who is holding a Fanta can on top of which sits a dead cat's head" or "posing with the corpse" of a man beaten to death in Abu Ghraib<sup>20</sup>. "'I guess we weren't really thinking, Hey, this guy has family, or, Hey, this guy was just murdered,' Harman said. 'It was just—Hey, it's a dead guy, it'd be cool to get a photo next to a dead person... people have photos of all kinds of things. Like, if a soldier sees somebody dead, normally they'll take photos of it'"<sup>21</sup>. The camera records the strange reality for the soldier, but also removes them from it, keeps them out of the frame, or poses them in control of the situation. Harman, as Gourevitch and Morris point out, did not have a "choice to be the witness to the dirty work on Tier 1A; it was her role. As a woman... just by her presence, [she would] amplify [the prisoners'] sense of powerlessness." Presumably, if any prisoners knew they were being photographed, that would add to their humiliation, too. And Harman's intent cannot be gleaned from the images, an intent that veered from eager complicity to supposed documenting, as she noted in a letter home to her lover:

I walk down stairs . . . to find "the taxicab driver" handcuffed backwards to his window naked with his underwear over his head and face. He looked like Jesus Christ. At first I had to laugh so I went on and grabbed the camera and took a picture. One of the guys took my asp and started "poking" at his

dick. Again I thought, okay that's funny then it hit me, that's a form of molestation. You can't do that. I took more pictures now to "record" what was going on. What Harman was really doing, Gourevitch and Morris suggest, was using her "memory as an external storage device. By downloading her impressions to a [photo card or file or] document, she could clear them from her mind and transform reality into an artifact." Photography and filming become a way to freeze, stuff, and control reality, confining it to a framed past; the main reason she snapped pictures of the man murdered in custody "'was to prove to pretty much anybody who looked at this guy, Hey, I was just lied to'". The photographs and videotapes settle and comfort the person behind the lens; they do not try to bring justice and truth to the human being they should be asking us to behold. The camera is a narcissistic mirror for the person holding it, an extension of Self and not a reaching out to the Other.

And so if the enemy has become film itself, how to make a film about war or, even more awfully, about Abu Ghraib? As director Michael Tucker noted in an interview, "'People are so jaded with basic human suffering that unless it is sensational, they don't respond to it.'"<sup>22</sup>

### **The Prisoner**

#### **Or: How Three People Made an Anti-Film War Film**

Tucker and Petra Epperlein's documentary *The Prisoner, Or: How I Planned To Kill Tony Blair* follows an Iraqi journalist who, with his brothers, is arrested in September 2003 after a raid by American soldiers and accused of plotting to assassinate the current British Prime Minister (on his forthcoming visit to Iraq); after the man was abused, humiliated, threatened, and "interrogated," he and his brothers were held until May 2004, in the inhumane conditions of Camp Ganci, part of Abu Ghraib, before being released, while the Army claims to have no record of Prisoner #151186 or those accusations against him. The film begins with a photograph, but it is nothing like those infamous Abu Ghraib photos, shown again in Errol Morris' *Standard Operating Procedure*. This is a photograph of a man holding a videocamera, pointed at us, and he's standing next to a lampshade. The photo itself seems a little unreal, almost animated, and it's pinned to what may be a manila file folder. Below the photo, in a typewriter-like font, are the words of a "Coalition Spokesman": "If they were innocent, they wouldn't be at Abu Ghraib." The camera zooms in and the photo becomes a video image, an image of the same man pointing the camcorder at what definitely seems like us now, waving, and saying "hello." An establishing shot shows what he is shooting—people on a beach, swimming and relaxing and generally having a good time. Then the film's half-whimsical, half-spy music score surfaces. We have been taken from a photo to a videorecording, but one made by the Iraqi man whom, we will soon discover, was at Abu Ghraib, yet he is welcoming us and showing us not only that he's happy—not a simple "victim"—but a side of Iraq we do not expect to see: partly unclothed Muslim men and women on holiday (in sharp contrast to the forcibly unclothed Muslim men in Abu Ghraib). What is redacted here is not information in a file but the identity of a bikini woman in the water—her privacy protected by a black bar—and then the title of the film, "The Prisoner," is shown next to the man with the camera, now posing as a mus-



cleman on the beach, an image rendered as an animated silhouette (the animations were done by co-director Epperlein). The pose is not a humiliating one, forced upon him in jail, and his playful show of strength is at odds with what we expect from the title. After the *Dr. Strangelovesque* subtitle appears next to another pose, the unanimated man breaks his exaggerated posture with laughter; this laughter, born of a wry refusal to succumb to the seriousness of tragedy, is one of the main ways this documentary's main character fights, confronts, and co-opts the army's and audience's expectations throughout the film while asserting a distance between subject and viewer. (The theme music and animation also illustrate the surreal, nearly comic nature of the grandiose charge against the man and his brothers—that of plotting to assassinate British PM Tony Blair—a charge as grotesquely cartoonish as the actual Army illustrations on documents representing detainees “without intelligence value” as ghost-robed smiley faces. The animation throughout this documentary also looks ahead to Ari Folman's *Waltz with Bashir*, a 2008 kind of “docudranimation” where an ex-soldier sifts through the trauma of his past war, his animated recollections finally turning into actual video footage of massacre.) We are being asked to interpret this scene with little context, but it is a scene that an Iraqi controls, one where he wields the camera.

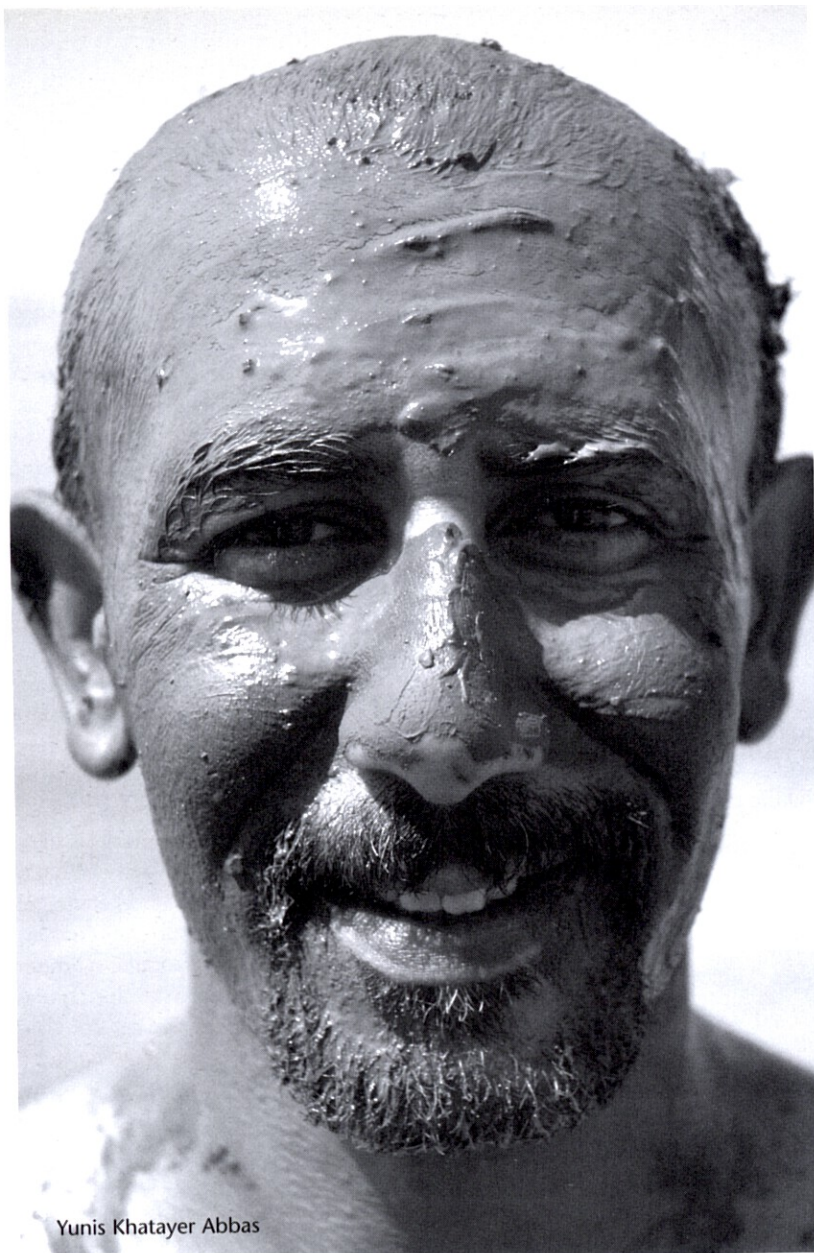
The radio chatter that began the film returns, and then Tucker and Epperlein return to footage from their previous film, *Gunner Palace*, where the man who had been holding the camera—Yunis Khatayer Abbas—is now kneeling and handcuffed, and confronted by a camera held by Tucker, embedded with

the 2/3 Field Artillery Unit in Baghdad. Yunis protests that he is a “journalist” and a soldier tells him to “shut up. I don't care. We've got a journalist with us, filmin' us right now.” Yunis looks at the camera and says, “Yeah, you see that in the camera.... The mistake of this.... Yeah, just ‘shut your mouth’ in Iraq.... I know that ‘shut up’.” Here the film asks us to consider persecuted vs. embedded journalism,<sup>23</sup> and suggests not only that journalists can easily be seen as threats, perhaps even the “journalist” shooting the film (indeed, two soldiers soon take the talking Yunis away, perhaps because of a concern about how he could be seen on camera; Yunis later says that, when working as a freelance cameraman, holding the camera was like holding an “RPG” rocket launcher—“very dangerous; you must be careful”—and, indeed, the soldiers who raid his home seize videotapes and CDs, seeming to interpret them as part of a bomb-making kit), but that it is the reader's/viewer's critical interpretation of the piece or video of journalism that matters most. Later, Yunis notes that the equipment the raiding soldiers found only marked him out as a journalist and that many people in the world have “tapes, and camera, video, photo.” Yunis and others are shown with cameras, Yunis on the beach pretending to fire his camcorder as if it is a gun. Now the filmmakers, previously embedded with the occupiers but now aligned with the occupied, point their camera at Yunis and reanimate him, only adding to his power, to Yunis' ability to fire back with his images and memories in ways that US forces cannot control or confine.

Yunis' refusal to “shut up,” along with his sarcastic quoting-back of his captors' orders, epitomizes both a film centred on his verbalized recollections of what happened to him—a constant







Yunis Khatayer Abbas

rebuttal of the official, all-too-brief Army file on him (that manila folder at the beginning)—and his constant talking, writing, and filming back against power (what good journalism should do). We soon hear Yunis' sense of history: he knows that "'shut up'" because, it turns out, he was jailed by Saddam Hussein's son Uday for his journalism, and his sense of what has happened to Baghdad is not a movie-inspired awe but puzzlement ("I can't believe Baghdad. 1000 years.... Now Americans have Baghdad. Why?"). We soon hear of Yunis' photography and journalism as participation and activism—"I must do something"—and see his photos of a burning, occupied Baghdad (to choral music, another odd subversion of our expectations, merging a traditional Christian form of elegy with an Arab man's documents of his home city's destruction). And we soon hear of Yunis' writing accounts of his imprisonment, while in prison, on cigarette foil, on his underwear, and on his skin, writing over the abuse inflicted on his body. The names, numbers, and fates that Yunis recorded on his underwear, for instance, are crosscut with and opposed to the official typed military reports on prisoners. The ultimate, triumphant importance of Yunis' words are emphasized by isolated captions of dialogue—as Yunis is taken away by the two sol-

diers, some of his words from his interview, in voiceover, appear on the screen next to the images of him, frozen from the film footage into snapshots. Thus *The Prisoner* constantly reminds us that the prisoners in Abu Ghraib cannot be reduced to mere images of victimhood and humiliation—they had their own thoughts and words against and about what was being done to them, thoughts and words that can be summoned up and opposed by us, the viewer, to the official statements and sharp orders ("shut up") that also appear as captions sometimes on screen. And then, too, there is trauma that cannot even be hinted at or communicated—Abbas pauses, tries to speak, but then says "I can't—," unable to speak of the arrests or his memory of his father during the raid. His silence voices the inexpressible, denying the ability of any sound or image to even echo a person's past trauma that still aches through them in the present and on into the future. And the structure of the film, this word-, photograph-, video- and silence-collage of Yunis' memories, divided as it is into "Chapters," like parts of a book, photo album, or even comic book, further emphasizes this sense of a man's ongoing, complex, personal life which can only make some sense based on their honest look back, not on any official, outside judgment or reduction of them to an identity as a "prisoner."

When Yunis recalls the electric shocks he was tortured with in Uday's Al-Radwaniya prison, there is the animation of a man alone in a small, bar-silhouetted space, the sound of dripping water, and then the sound of buzzing electricity as Yunis mimics what was done to him on his hand. Here, crucially, the animation and non-diegetic sound ask us to more compassionately imagine—not

simply see a recreation of—Yunis' trauma. *Apocalypse Now* and *Jarhead* editor Walter Murch has commented,

**"The central dilemma of film compared to all other narrative media is that it's literal, in that what you see is what was literally there, and yet we as filmmakers have to create a spaciousness, a sketchy ambiguity, that allows the audience themselves to piece it all together and make it powerfully their own."... "The danger of a well-made bad movie, in this sense, is that it crushes the imagination of the audience."**<sup>24</sup>

*The Prisoner* gives Yunis' memories their own space and respect by not superimposing recreations or stark images on them, while allowing the viewer to simply listen to his words and try to extend their imagination a little, with the slightest of artful prompting, to him and his past suffering.

When Yunis recalls the US invasion, he remembers seeing an American soldier and thinking, "Oh, this is an American soldier like Rambo. Wow. I didn't see that before. Just on TV." An animated representation of Stallone's movie character, holding an



RPG, flashes on screen. Later, a female interrogator chats with Yunis, trying to coax him to give information by leading the conversation to Harrison Ford's Indiana Jones and Clint Eastwood's cowboys in California, selling an image of an America he can move to if he cooperates. Film or TV characters are not used to strip anyone of their humanity here, but to show the cultural stereotypes that the US promoted and set up for themselves as cartoonish ideals (Yunis takes far greater care than any of the soldiers in Gourevitch and Morris' article, for instance, to differentiate between people, asking about the American soldiers abusing and terrorizing him: "Why American do that with me? Not American civilian people, but this guys"). Yunis' dry delivery of his thought about Rambo suggests not only the disappointment of this action hero-stereotype that he soon realized but that many Iraqis' notions of "America" and its soldiers were based on popular images, images soon to be replaced by those of Abu Ghraib; his assertion that "I am not Clint Eastwood, I am not James Bond" defies Americans' cartoonish stereotyping of Iraqis. The sudden, horrible reality of an occupation or invasion is not likened to television or film; instead, Yunis realizes the sharp difference between mediated reality and real life in front of him: "I didn't see that before. Just on TV. I told myself, 'This is the war. Now.'" Then he decided that what he can do is film back, film his non-Hollywood, homeland reality, photograph and recording what he sees around him, not someone else's posed version (*The Prisoner* shows American soldiers instructing Iraqi children in the street to pose enthusiastically for the camera, making them seem liberators, not occupiers).

Even the interview that makes up the bulk of the film counters the act of interrogation. Yunis reasserts his twin identities of "journalist" and "civilian," not "prisoner." Instead of confession, Yunis offers exposure, revealing through his halting English and occasional pained silences, along with his own re-creations of abuse he suffered, a talking- and taking-back of power. He tells what happens in order that the American military system's official version and their secret, behind-doors abuse not remain the last words or images but are replaced by the perspective that matters most—his (and, by extension, the Iraqi people's). Again, the viewer is asked to slowly realize, to translate for themselves, just how difficult (and perhaps cathartic or therapeutic) it must be for Yunis to recall, reanimate, and re-create these ordeals. But the viewers' interpretation is not prioritized—Yunis' account remains most important; after all, he was actually an interpreter himself while in Camp Ganci. Specialist Ben Thompson recalls in the film, helping to translate between the soldiers and prisoners (Thompson amplifies the sense that Abu Ghraib cannot be reduced to images or words, saying he just doesn't "know how to... express it"; Thompson is one of the soldiers whom Yunis mentions as a good soldier and their relationship in the film, though they are interviewed in two countries, far away from each other, is mediated by the camera to suggest a link between American Self and Iraqi Other that is a link of respectful difference). It is Yunis who tells the story, Yunis who chooses what to recall or not, Yunis who finds relief or not in certain images, memories, and words, saying in response to the "sorry" he received from a general just before his release after nine months in Abu Ghraib, having never been charged, "I don't need this 'sorry'."

Yunis' refusal to blame "American people inside America,"

who "didn't know anything about this," he says, stands in marked contrast to the images that provoked widespread blame and led up to the entirely unjustified invasion of Yunis' country, "my country," he reminds the viewer. His analysis, based on his situation, is simple and sharply counters the military tribunals' punishment of low-level officers: "The big generals. They know. The small soldiers, they didn't know. Just 'Yes, sir.' [Those above them,] they must know what happened inside the jail. You see [patting the writing on his underwear]." And so Yunis asks us, the post-9/11 viewer, to see, to see what he recorded and saw, to see from the point of view of an Iraqi civilian and journalist what so many Americans refused to see, that there was an approved system of abuse and torture, perpetrated mainly against innocent Iraqis during the occupation. And then, after the film has prioritized Yunis' account above all, suggested that film itself is not the answer—but only one response (along with writing, photography, even silence), and a response that requires a viewer's careful consideration of who is filming and why they are filming—it offers Yunis' ultimate, triumphal overturning of the occupying forces' imprisoning expectations and impositions. Yunis, this "decent man," as he says and we clearly see, recalls, "Sometimes, thinking, I told myself, maybe when I'm going outside the jail, maybe when I see Tony Blair, I kill him. And cut his head. But when I'm released, [tsks], I can't do that." This innocent man was forced to the point of imagining he would take on the identity pinned on him, yet this confession, coming after his account of imprisonment, interrogation, abuse, sickening food, mortar attacks, and unlawful detention in the camps, defies our judgment as viewers even as it reverses the assumption of guilt. For if a viewer imagines that detainees are guilty, why can an innocent detainee not imagine fulfilling his guilt to spite us?

It's Thompson who reminds us, near the end, "It wasn't a dream. It wasn't a story. It's real." Trauma and horror and death are not just images or words or eyewitness accounts, but actual, visceral pain and suffering that film cannot contain and that we viewers cannot know—"this 'we'... who has never experienced anything like what they went through"<sup>25</sup>—but should still regard, deeply consider, struggle with, and feel the urgent responsibility to stop, or at least not support or dismiss.<sup>xvi</sup> In its admission of the gulf between real-life participant and film-viewer, the gap between a lived truth and a documentary claim to truth, in its basic refusal to be merely "film, [that] technology ideally suited to the dynamic representation of closely observed reality"<sup>26</sup>, *The Prisoner* acts as a constant counter-insurgent to a containing or comforting or rationalize-able image of horror, one that allows the post-9/11 viewer to numb or detach or offer a cinema-inspired, vengeful response to torture or murder. *The Prisoner* offers no direct, live (even re-created) images of abuse or suffering because they are too easy to make our own and stamp an official judgment on. They are not yours, Tucker and Epperlein and Abbas's film proclaims. They are Yunis' and the other prisoners', to remember and recover and reclaim as much as they can or want to, for their own sake. For, as Yunis says, turning Bush's meaningless ideals into a personal, pointed plea, his mistaken plural most fitting: "I need peace in Iraq. Freedom. I am not terrorist. I am civilian people and I'm journalist. And I have a heart. You see?" As he pats his arm, a part of a body



whose abuses we are, at most, only allowed to imagine, we can, at least, see a little of his point of view, of his truth, and of his reality. And if a viewer does not, it may be less through any flaw of this film than through a deepening fault of war-films, in general, and a failure of compassion within the post-9/11 viewer. It is these twinned abuses of imaginative power—the potential artistic power on screen and the potential sympathetic power in the audience—rather than any “war on terror,” that most need to be fought against

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#### Notes

- The following repeats, revises, and adds to the list by Susan Carruthers in her article “No one’s looking: the disappearing audience for war,” *Media, War & Conflict* 1.1 (2008): 70–76. In addition to *The Prisoner*, here are some of the most prominent American-made documentaries dealing with the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq to appear in the past six years: *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004; dir. Michael Moore); *Gunner Palace* (2005; dir. Michael Tucker and Petra Epperlein); *Occupation: Dreamland* (2005; dir. Garrett Scott and Ian Olds); *The Blood of My Brother* (2005; dir. Andrew Berends); *The War Tapes* (2006; dir. Deborah Scranton); *Iraq in Fragments* (2006; dir. James Longley); *Iraq for Sale: The War Profiteers* (2006; dir. Robert Greenwald); *My Country, My Country* (2006; dir. Laura Poitras); *The Ground Truth* (2006; dir. Patricia Foulkrod); *Operation Homecoming: Writing the Wartime Experience* (2007; dir. Richard E. Robbins); *No End in Sight* (2007; dir. Charles Ferguson); *Ghosts of Abu Ghraib* (2007; dir. Rory Kennedy); *Taxi to the Dark Side* (2007; dir. Alex Gibney); *Jerabek* (2007; dir. Civia Tamarkin); *Body of War* (2007; dir. Phil Donahue and Ellen Spiro); *Standard Operating Procedure* (2008; dir. Errol Morris). Then there have been the British and American feature films: *Home of the Brave* (2006; dir. Irwin Winkler); *The Road to Guantanamo* (2006; dir. Mat Whitecross and Michael Winterbottom); *The Situation* (2007; dir. Philip Haas); *The Kingdom* (2007; dir. Peter Berg); *Rendition* (2007; dir. Gavin Hood); *In the Valley of Elah* (2007; dir. Paul Haggis); *Badland* (2007; dir. Francesco Lucente); *Battle for Haditha* (2007; dir. Nick Broomfield); *Redacted* (2007; dir. Brian DePalma); *Lions for Lambs* (2007; dir. Robert Redford); *War, Inc.* (2008; dir. Joshua Seftel); *Stop-Loss* (2008; dir. Kimberly Peirce); *The Hurt Locker* (2008; dir. Kathryn Bigelow). There have been two American TV series about the second Iraq war: *Over There* (2005; created by Steven Bochco and Chris Gerolmo); *Generation Kill* (2008; written by Ed Burns, David Simon, and Evan Wright).
- The film premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in September 2006 but an extended version, with footage from an interview with ex-soldier Ben Thompson after he contacted the filmmakers, was released in March 2007. See Michael Tucker, “My Prisoner, My Brother,” *Vanity Fair* online (vf.com), February 20, 2007, <http://www.vanityfair.com/politics/features/2007/02/abughraib200702>. 10 pp. Accessed March 13, 2009.
- Susan Carruthers, “No one’s looking: the disappearing audience for war,” *Media, War & Conflict* 1.1 (2008) 73.
- Jim Lucy, “Broadway Electrical Supply’s Jeff Birnbaum recounts his experience as an EMT at the World Trade Center on 9-11,” *CEE News and Electrical Marketing* [now part of *EC&M Magazine*], February 13, 2002, <http://september11.ceenews.com/microsites/newsarticle.asp?mode=print&newsarticleid=285875&releaseid=&srid=10210&magazineid=26&siteid=13>. Accessed March 11, 2009.
- “Personal Accounts of a Morning Rush That Became the Unthinkable,” *The New York Times*, September 12, 2001, <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/12/nyregion/12VIGN.html?ex=1237089600&en=907622a3de96c96d&ei=5070>. Accessed March 5, 2009.
- “Just Like A Movie: September 11 And The Terror Of Moving Images,” *Senses of Cinema* 17 (November-December 2001), <http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/01/17/symposium/schaffer.html>. Accessed March 13, 2009.
- Philip Gourevitch and Errol Morris, “Exposure,” *The New Yorker*, <http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/03/24/080324fa\_fact\_gourevitch>. 13 pp. Accessed March 11, 2009.
- “Regarding the Torture of Others,” *The New York Times Magazine*, May 23, 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/23/magazine/23PRISONS.html?ex=1400644800&en=a2cb6a6bd297c8f&ei=5007&partner=USERLAND>. 7 pp. Accessed March 13, 2009.
- Shawn Doherty, “Former Abu Ghraib guard says prisoners were treated even worse than was reported,” *The Capital Times*, September 30, 2008, <http://www.madison.com/tct/news/307209>. Accessed March 5, 2009.
- At times, even when “we” were considered, it was to make light of what “they” were shown doing in the photos; as Sontag notes, “To ‘stack naked men’ is like a college fraternity prank, said a caller to Rush Limbaugh,” who replied, “Exactly! . . . and we’re going to hamper our military effort, and then we are going to really hammer them because they had a good time” (“Regarding the Torture of Others”). The “we” and “they” become a patriotic “our military effort” that the American audience should rally behind. (This cavalier, not-so-different-from-what-we-do-at-home attitude was epitomized by Donald Rumsfeld’s handwritten comment next to his signature on a September 2002 memo concerning new interrogation techniques at Guantanamo: “However, I stand for 8–10 hours a day. Why is standing limited to 4 hours?”) Sontag notes the pornographic nature of many of the Abu Ghraib photos, another connection to “sexual humiliation in college fraternities and on sports teams” and also to Internet smut; in their dingy, on-the-scene poses, the photos perhaps smack a little of the backroom and nightclub nudity-coaxing and -posing *Girls Gone Wild* videos. In one sequence in *The Prisoner*, a blackboard in a US Army building in Iraq shows some of the pornographic names for various operations that will be or are being carried out, such as Operations “Gunner-Spank,” “Bulldog Gang Bang,” and “Big Jism.” “Operation Grabass” netted the innocent man at the heart of *The Prisoner*.
- “Valkyries Over Iraq: The trouble with war movies,” *Harper’s Magazine* 311.1866 (November 2005): 65.
- Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003: 10. Sontag notes that Ernst Friedrich’s collection of war photographs, *Krieg dem Kriege! (War Against War!)* (14), was acclaimed by many left-wingers and anti-war activists, “who predicted that the book would have a decisive influence on public opinion” (15), and French director Abel Gance included close-ups of “hideously disfigured ex-combatants” (16) in *J’accuse* only for World War II to still erupt a year later. Likewise, Weschler notes that, around 1979, when Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* and Cimino’s *The Deer Hunter* appeared, “There was a lot of talk at the time about how these films were at last going to confront the moral depravity of the Vietnam War” (69).
- There are, of course, many other possibilities as to why the most horrifying photographic exposures of military corruption, abuse, and human-rights violations in American history did not result in a great public outcry, a widespread investigation or reformation of Abu Ghraib, the prison’s chain-of-command or interrogation procedures, or even the voting-out of the Bush administration in the national election just six months after the photos appeared on newscasts, in newspapers, and on the Internet. These may include many viewers’ sense of the incidents’ far-awayness in place and remoteness in time, a kind of 24-inspired idea that harsh tactics are necessary at times of war, the childish notion that, “after all, they (the terrorists) started it” (Sontag, “Regarding the Torture of Others”), sentiments that the prisoners were still guilty (although many high-ranking officers have commented that around 90% of detainees in Abu Ghraib were innocent, guilty of only minor, non-combat-related charges, or never found guilty of any crime), and a kind of “at least” response (“at least” they weren’t killed—although a number of prisoners died while in detention, from beatings or other torture, mortar attacks on Abu Ghraib, or aggravated medical conditions).
- Bruno Dumont’s *Twentynine Palms* (2003), while a highly artistic, philosophical, existential-horror film, may also be one of the more disturbing war or anti-war films, culminating as it does in one man’s murderous, patriarchal externalization of trauma, after being the victim of a seemingly random act of violence. The film is set in that desolate area of California near the military base and the man has shaved his head, Marine-like, just before emerging from the motel door (echoes of *Psycho*) to commit his horrific revenge.
- Weschler, op.cit. 75.
- Gourevitch and Morris op.cit.
- 21 ibid
- Christine Kearney, “U.S. documentary shows everyday abuse of Abu Ghraib,” *Reuters*, March 25, 2007, <http://www.reuters.com/article/filmNews/idUSN2326524820070326>. Accessed March 15, 2009.
- The Self also identifies with and helps the Other here, for not only do Epperlein and Tucker raise the implicit question of which film, the embedded *Gunner Palace* or mainly one-man interview *The Prisoner*, is more journalistic, but the directors suggest that Yunis’ plight—a journalist attacked in a war zone—could as easily be theirs. As Michael Tucker noted in an interview with me—for *Gunner Palace* but while he was making *The Prisoner*—the overlap between Self and Other breaks down any mediated sense of detachment: “It’s really chilling—he’s 38 years old, just like I am, he’s a cameraman, just like I am. Using a word like ‘moving’ wouldn’t even do it justice. You’re just sitting there, going, ‘I cannot believe that this happened.’ I mean, from a distance you can believe that it happens, but when you see it up close and personal...” (“Dispatch from Operation Grabass,” *Vue Weekly*, July 7, 2005, <www.vueweekly.com/article.php?id=2194>. Accessed March 15, 2009.)
- Weschler op.cit. 68.
- Sontag op.cit. 125.
- Of all the poor reviews of *The Prisoner*, all of them misunderstanding its form or aim or both, Andrew O’Hehir’s shrugging capsule was most unintentionally on the mark in its assessment of the documentary as a “pretty anti-cinematic experience.” (“Beyond the Multiplex,” *Salon.com*, March 22, 2007, <http://www.salon.com/ent/movies/review/2007/03/22/btm/index3.html>. Accessed March 5, 2009.)



# The Dialogical Documentary

JENNIFER FOX ON FINDING A NEW FILM LANGUAGE IN  
*FLYING: CONFESSIONS OF A FREE WOMAN* (2007)

ANGELICA FENNER

Originally co-produced for Danish television, the six-hour autobiographical series, *Flying: Confessions of a Free Woman* has gained international acclaim since entering the film festival circuit in early 2007. American filmmaker Jennifer Fox is no stranger to the longitudinal documentary form, having earlier produced for PBS the ten-hour series *An American Love Story* (1999), about a biracial couple living in New York. In her most recent work, a crisis in her own romantic life becomes the impetus for a global journey to understand how other women's sense of personal fulfillment may be shaped by, as well as resist, culturally-specific norms of gender socialization. Fox has also been accompanying her film to college and university campuses to address social issues raised in the film and to share her views on 'passing the camera,' a technique she developed during five years of

gathering footage. The following is an edited transcription of her discussion with participants in my graduate seminar on autobiographical documentary, which took place on October 11, 2007. Those whose comments appear here include: Sarah Barmak, Paul Filipiuk, Jennifer Jackson, John Koster, Rad Simonpilai, and Caitlin Starowicz.

## PART ONE: CAMERA TECHNIQUE

**Jennifer Fox:** So you may wonder why I have my camera here, but I usually find it really interesting to bring it along. This is the camera (*Sony PDX-10*) that shot the film. It's been all over the world, and now people in my office toss it around with each other, so I'm not precious about it. I chose for its small size, which makes it really accessible. You can immediately see the difference [referring to the Canon XL2 simultaneously being used to videotape

Fox filming Duska, a Bosnian refugee in the U.K.





Jennifer Fox with her Sony PDX-10





her guest appearance]. You can't pass that other camera, it's just not possible. It's not just the size, it's also the intimidation factor. The whole thing about the new technology and small equipment is that people perceive this as a consumer camera they could own and use. You don't need to be so muscular. Particularly when you're working with women, weight really matters, so when I'm filming, I'm immediately passing them the camera and telling them, "All you have to do is point the camera at the person talking." [Fox now hands her camera to students, who pass it among themselves and record each other and her throughout the discussion.] That's pretty much the extent of my instructions, except, once you set your frame you have to look up, because I can't have a conversation with someone who's looking at a flip screen! Ultimately, the conversation is more important than the framing. In India, for example, I get off the plane and immediately hand Paramita the camera—but you don't see that happen because there's no second camera shooting. I actually spent a lot of time getting used to having it in my life, relaxing with it and trying to diminish its importance. I wanted to incorporate it in a non-evasive way, so I'm doing a lot of this [Fox holds the camera at arm's length aimed towards herself], or if I wanted to film myself doing something, I'd just set it on the table and not even use a tripod. What I find quite important in making *Flying* and also in observational documentary—although it isn't always addressed—is the effect of the camera on us. Observe your own feelings as we pass the camera—how does it feel when he (*gestures towards Rad*) points the camera at you?

**Paul:** Terrible.

**Jennifer Fox:** And how do you feel when you hold the camera?

**Rad:** In control. [*Laughter*]

**Jennifer Fox:** Something else also happens energetically—when you turn on the camera, you wake up. How are you using that awareness to facilitate the encounter with the person before you? Even though she [*points to student currently holding the camera*] thinks she's invisible and that I'm the one being filmed, both parties—in front of and behind the camera—are affected by this object. How does that then impact the scene? So as you pass the camera now, consider how you feel when you are using it and when it's pointed at you. What different reactions do you go through when you're aware of being observed? And how does it feel when you film yourself? Is there a way for you to relax when filming yourself? How long does that take?

**Angelica:** It's interesting that we can feel so intimidated and exposed by the camera. You're describing the camera as an empowering tool for self-knowledge and for facilitating intersubjectivity. Yet these connotations are not very prevalent in our culture.

**Jennifer Fox:** Well, the camera terrifies us, but it also seduces us. You wouldn't have people appearing on reality television and doing so much blogging and posting of videos on the internet, if there wasn't an enormous degree of seduction. I think we have a longing to be seen in an absolute way, unlike the way you see me now, where you're also interpreting. But a camera doesn't interpret, supposedly. A camera is objective.

**Paul:** But isn't all objectivity in some way rooted in subjectivity...?

**Jennifer Fox:** There's a psychological component: we all walk around with layers of baggage obscuring the way we perceive

our family, our society, the events that have taken place in our lives. For me, the desire to pick up the camera stemmed from the feeling that I couldn't find a reflection of myself in the world. There were no images out there for the life I was leading. I'm a so-called 'single woman,' yet I've always been in a relationship. I'm leading this very autonomous male life—I don't have children, I'm not married—and yet I'm a woman. So I felt that there wasn't a representation or a mirror for me in the world. Which is why, for the first time—because I've been making films for a really long time—for the very first time I decided to self-film. There was a sense of discovery that, for example, I have a really nice loft or I have a lot of really nice friends. Until the camera captured that, it was like I didn't see. Even my parents—I was quite surprised to see how charismatic they are.

**Paul:** Could it be that there is this *ostranienie* or defamiliarization going on, where the camera makes the everyday seem strange?

**Jennifer Fox:** I think inherent in the camera, much like in psychotherapy, is the neutral observer. People concede to be on film, because they perceive the camera to be an objective witness. The 'seduction' of the camera relates to people's longing to have a *true* image, even though it is 'just an image.' I'm talking about the shooting of the film, because once you begin editing, you begin to create story, and that's another issue altogether.

**John:** You say people are seduced by this longing for an absolute or true image of themselves or of the world. When people hold the camera for the first time or get involved in making a film, do you think that they realize that this is not quite true and that, in fact, there's something else going on?

**Jennifer Fox:** That's a good question. I don't think the people who pass the camera with me fully grasp that the ultimate object will not necessarily be exactly what we filmed, it will be an extraction. *Flying* is an incredibly constructed object. I know, because I shot it, went through all the footage, and then sat in the editing room and decided what pieces to place where.

**John:** So, then, isn't passing the camera around and telling everyone how easy it is kind of a lure? Isn't that kind of dishonest?

**Jennifer Fox:** No, because shooting the footage is almost an experiential thing; it's different than assembling the footage. I am looking for reality on film. That is my goal as a documentary filmmaker. And what is reality? Most of the time you bring a camera out and people disappear. It's like, you can see them back up into themselves and a wall comes up and they become a construction: "Let me tell you about my life." And they weed out all the good things, usually. You know, they do a presentation. But I'm interested in something else and I would call it presence. So I am always looking for how to really bring people to the scene, so that when I film them they are real in some way. There are a million ways to do it. I'm backing my way into some ideas here. In this room, we're all affecting each other. If one person leaves, the room will change. If someone else enters, the room will change. So we are creating this unified field. If I'm a filmmaker and I'm behind the camera like she is [*points to student holding camera*], I can affect the scene just by my awareness. Now, I can also affect the scene in another way, by passing the camera, which is a way to get people to be present and not disappear. Does that make sense? The encounter between us is more truthful this way. In this particular film, I knew that if we





Fox being covered by rural Pakistani women.

put someone there observing women talking, they would leave, emotionally and mentally, and all the intimacy would go away. A film is made up of bits of images, but those images can be real or false, depending upon if people really show up or not. I think we don't make that distinction enough. If we have a picture of people, but, in fact, their mind and their spirit are elsewhere, what are we really showing?

**Paul:** Just to crystallize what you're saying in my own terms – passing the camera basically equalizes the power relationship between subject and filmmaker, so that the other person has a certain degree of choice about what is filmed and how. People tend to open up once they actually have access to their own representation or a representation of others in the room.

**Jennifer Fox:** Absolutely. I've seen that happen, and that's my interpretation of what's going on. But I feel that we can't lump it all together. My job is not like your job; my job is to make a film that shows something that might have otherwise remained invisible and to do so in the most honest way possible. A film is made up of many scenes and sequences, based on a series of shots. I have to figure out how to make these units be as truthful as possible. But then you have to deconstruct what truth is: for me as an observer, it's authenticity of spirit or oneness, when people really show up. If the units are authentic, then I certainly have a better chance of making an authentic whole; but the construction, of course, is a separate question. When I ask people in venues such as this classroom to try passing the camera themselves, I'm really interested in the fact that people actually learn things by passing it, because they show up in a way they wouldn't have without the camera. So it can actually be a psychological tool. You don't have to use it just for filmmaking.

**Caitlin:** Do you think this mode of autobiography specifically lends itself to a female aesthetic?

**Jennifer Fox:** I think that passing is a real representation of the way women talk. It doesn't mean men don't talk like that. I can't tell you how men talk because I'm not a man. I mean that real-

ly sincerely. I think it would be very interesting if a man set out to make a film about the way men talk. Maybe they would pass the camera, or maybe they would do something else. The whole idea comes out of my very non-academic observation of my conversations with my girlfriends. They had certain qualities: they went on for hours; they were circular; they were non-goal oriented, meaning we weren't necessarily trying to solve a problem, although problems sometimes were solved. And they often raised subjects that resurfaced again and again over the course of several years of shooting: relationships, work, or children. And somehow, through this kind of horizontal, circular, and non-goal-oriented movement in women's conversations some kind of healing happens. But it's invisible. So, then, as a filmmaker, I took those words and began to imagine a technique that could make this visible. That's where passing comes in and why the film actually did have rules. The camera had to be passed and it needed to involve a definitive amount of time, meaning, you know, 1-3 hours. We basically created the conditions to enable women's conversations and food or drink was usually present. I'm not kidding! If you look at the original proposal for this film, food is a very big element. I know it sounds funny, but it's not an interview, it's a conversation between women. I had other rules: everyone had to agree to be on camera—there could be no witnesses. So nobody could say, "Oh, I'm just going to watch while you guys talk." Now would passing work with men? I don't know. Maybe it's the perfect technique for men or maybe it's just a technique for enabling horizontal conversation. But, personally, I think the characteristics of passing are geared towards women. I was going to ask you, what do you think? Pass me that camera!

**Caitlin:** I think it really did lend itself to a specifically feminine aesthetic, in that it recreated a female experience in its style and structure. It's scary to take hold of the camera and also to see yourself represented. But by doing that you assert yourself, which is difficult—I think—for women. So it really did speak to



me, not just because of the content or the people within it, but in the very construction and style of it.

**Jennifer Fox:** I'm curious if the men in the room think they would need a different technique. One could come up with something totally different.

**Rad:** I think men are more keen on their performance if there's a camera on. I see this sort of thing all the time with guys trying to do hip hop moves: they carry around little camcorders with them and record themselves in freestyle sessions or they hang around and interview each other, but they're always putting on that performance, so I don't know if passing the camera would work in the same way with men.

**Jennifer Fox:** So if we were to brainstorm about the qualities of male conversation (*turns to write on blackboard*) maybe we'd come up with words like competitive, judgmental, goal-oriented? Then we'd have to find a language that would best capture that — this is only for shooting individual scenes; we're not talking about the construction of the whole film, yet.

**Jennifer:** That's the heart of Deborah Tannen's work. She observed that little girls' playgroups tend to be cooperative networks, displaying circularity and lack of goal-orientation for the sake of co-operation, whereas for little boys the conversation seems oriented towards establishing hierarchy.

**Jennifer Fox:** We have to translate these observations into form, because film is a representational art. How would you represent these kinds of verbal interactions among men? It seems to me that passing the camera is the *wrong* way to represent them.

**Paul:** So you might want to give all the men their own camera, instead of sharing one ...?

**Jennifer Fox:** Well, it's very interesting to think about. I think that a man would also have to make the film, because one would have to try to enter in a male way into conversations between men.

**John:** But how do you represent women's conversation without confronting your own use of a certain discourse? For instance, whether or not their conversations have goals, goals do structure the film story itself.

**Jennifer Fox:** Yes, absolutely, but then you get into the bigger unit of storytelling. Storytelling is less gendered and more universal. It's true that the content we women may be interested in is often different. *Flying* mostly attracts women audiences, because some men don't want to hear women talking about feelings and sexuality. But if you look at *Flying*, it's actually utilizes a very classic dramaturgy that holds up across all types of filmmaking, namely, "character introduced in a crisis." We open with this image archive that leads in a very montage-way to the present: "I never wanted to be a girl. I lived like a boy, and now I'm pregnant. What am I going to do?" Classic setup; you see that across the board in all kinds of dramaturgy — at least in Western culture. Then we go back to say: "Six months earlier everything was fine. But something started to go wrong. I had a lover, and having a lover already has dramatic problems because I couldn't have everything I wanted. And then my best friend had a brain tumor operation, so suddenly age was upon us."

There's a whole discussion of how we tell stories and why we tell them the way we do. You can compare it to the structure of your own life: you're born and as you grow up you encounter obsta-

cles — physical, psychological, external obstacles. You have to go to school, graduate, get a job, maybe get married. At each stage, these stories and subplots are going on — relationships, financial issues, family — and that's the basis of what we call dramaturgy. As documentary filmmakers, the only difference is that we can't show all the stories at once, so we select the main drama we want to portray within the given time available.

**Angelica:** When you started this five-year contract with the producers at the Danish Film Institute, did you have a sense of where you were headed with the project from the beginning, or was it sort of an open-ended thing: "see where this goes, see where my life goes and what kind of story evolves out of this"? Because, depending on your parameters, the dramaturgy and narrative arc may be very different.

**Jennifer:** I had no idea what kind of plot would evolve. All I knew was that I would film myself, my girl friends (not my men friends), the women in my family, and women I would arrange to meet here and around the world, to add the element of strangers and the unknown. And that I would pass the camera with these four groups over time and investigate the way women talk and try to represent that. When I first started filming, I was with this married guy, but I hadn't met Patrick yet. So I had no idea that the film would be so centered on this plot of 'one man, now two men, what should I do?,' which basically becomes the glue around which everything else is structured.

**Angelica:** I can't help thinking of the French ethnographic filmmaker, Jean Rouch, who introduced the idea of "the camera as catalyst" in direct cinema. What you're doing, in some way, is a continuation, a refinement, and arguably perhaps also an improvement on this idea. So often, as a documentarist, it seems like you have to choose between filming the reality or living the reality, but you can't do both. Because even in informal settings where you are mingling among others, as soon as you pull out the camera, all of a sudden you're not part of the tableau. There's always this choice: you can capture the moment on camera but not be part of it, or be part of it but then you don't capture it, it's not recorded. What you're suggesting is a way to overcome this division. It's like you can live and film. You can more fully film the experience of living and you can more fully live the experience of filming!

**Jennifer:** That's true. The idea to put myself in the film actually came last in the planning. The first idea grew out of the fact that I was noticing in my mid-thirties that despite everything that I had experienced in my life, it wasn't the men that were holding my life together, it was these amazing conversations I had with my women friends. So for a while all I knew was that I wanted to make a film about female conversations, but there was no narrative context for it and I didn't know how I going to film this, because— like I said — I knew the conversations would collapse if I brought in a camera person. The second idea came to me because I travel so much. I had just arrived in South Africa for the first time, and I was on a film team that was teaching and training there. It was an all-male team, which is often the case when you get higher up in the world — you find yourself mostly working with men. When we took a lunch break, I went into the corner with the two local staff, both secretaries. Within five minutes we were talking about all kinds of things and having the most amazing conversations. It made me wonder, does the way



women speak cross boundaries of culture, ethnicity, and class? Because here I was - a white, American, middle-class, Jewish woman from Philadelphia - and here they were - one mixed-heritage girl and one African girl from the townships, both in their 20s. The third idea was that I should put myself in the project; that came last and it was only because I was in this genuine crisis of representation. I knew I couldn't stand somebody observing me on camera — I knew I would stop being real and would go into performance. That's when I began to practice how to incorporate the camera into my life by myself. I made rules for myself just like I made rules for the scenes of passing the camera. I tried to diminish my critical mind and relax with the camera, because the minute you start self-criticizing is the minute that you start performing. We all have this inner criticism running all the time: I'm too fat, my nose is too big, I'm ugly, I should be x, I should be y. As students, you are developing your critical and analytical abilities, but to create presence in front of the camera, you have to relax those mechanisms.

**Sarah:** But are those two things necessarily separate: presence and self-analysis?

**Jennifer Fox:** It depends, because often analysis goes hand in hand with criticism and judgment. Let's say you take the camera home tonight and you decide to film yourself for the next three hours. The first obstacle is not the technology, it's your mind saying, "I am so stupid" or "Why am I doing it this way?" or "Maybe there's a right way to pour the tea?"

**Sarah:** I think you're right in some senses, but the camera also does function as a tool of analysis because it puts the subject under scrutiny. And when you are the agent deciding to put your life under scrutiny - which you have done - then you perform a form of self-analysis and self-criticism. We can see in the course of the plot - of your life - as it unfolds, things change and you re-evaluate as you go along based a lot of the time on revelations that occur on camera. Previously, you told us that you wondered whether these revelations would have happened if the camera hadn't been there. So becoming fully present to yourself can't be completely separated from self-analysis.

**Jennifer:** True, but I am talking about different types of filming. When I'm alone and self-filming, I'm trying to relax that critical apparatus. Self-criticism in our life is generally on remote control. In this kind of work you have to be able to relax that mechanism, to use it when it's useful and turn it off when it's dysfunctional. It's an interesting dilemma because, of course, I have to be self-analytical on camera otherwise I wouldn't develop as a character. But I'm not thinking about that on screen, I'm just trying to cope with my life. And I'm not actually thinking about you watching me, because if I start thinking about that, I won't be a good character.

**Sarah:** ... and then you lose presence.

**Jennifer Fox:** Exactly. I worked with the camera for a really long time to make it not important to me. And again, I made rules: I can't dress up or put on make-up for the camera, I'm not going to prepare at all. And I would force myself to take it everywhere — to the bathroom, to the bedroom - you see all that. I would only get dressed up if I was getting dressed up anyway. I would film all the time every day, even if I'm having the stupidest day in the world. Film when there's nothing going on, so that I'm so used to filming that I even manage to take the cam-

era out when something important goes on. Actually, your natural inclination is *not* to pick up the camera in crisis, unless it has become a part of your daily practice. I would video diary a lot, even though I knew that most of those would never make it into the film because diaries make for terrible filmmaking. It was more for the purpose of getting used to articulating myself and remembering those authentic feelings. For the film we used a lot of those moments between the words and the diary, which offered an authentic reflection. Unfortunately, I don't have a theoretical background, I come from filmmaking as a practice. I'm concerned with getting results on camera. But I was very much - and I'm glad you articulated it - trying to figure out how to live and film, because that is a very important idea for my work as a filmmaker. For this project, I had to figure out how to film myself while being real, and have life go on, have miscarriages, boyfriends, girlfriends, and travel without crew, and relax, all while living with this camera!

**Jennifer:** So, how many hours a day were you filming?

**Jennifer Fox:** Sometimes upwards of twenty tapes in a day, because, the thing about passing is, these women's conversations go on for hours. You turn on the camera, you pass for the duration of the conversation, and you turn it off at the end of the evening. I do that in order to not judge what is good or bad within this conversation, but just let it happen and let everything be important. And if it's just me alone on a rainy day, maybe it's just two tapes. But I made it a practice — every day I got up and I practiced filmmaking.

**Paul:** What are you looking for, specifically, in regards to technology? Is it how many pixels you can pack into a certain shot? Are you looking for the most vivid images? Or are you just trying to capture the essence, the presence of the situation, so that it doesn't really matter how the image looks...?

**Jennifer Fox:** No, it matters. In terms of technical quality, this is pretty much the smallest camera up to a certain year that you could use that would be acceptable to broadcasters. This is a DV Cam, but today I would probably be shooting HD. My technology is always moving every time I make a film. Technology is influencing how we make films and our films are influencing the technology. But this technique of passing the camera is throwing aesthetics to the wind - by definition. It's saying intimacy is more important than aesthetics; presence is more important than technical quality. I am more concerned that we have a really present conversation than I am concerned with what the image looks like.

**Paul:** Do you think there is a correlation between getting a detailed, clear image and getting presence? Or can the image be impressionistic or abstracted?

**Jennifer Fox:** In this case, it's the recording technique that affects presence. But if I could get the same result more beautifully, I probably would try. Also, you're talking to someone who started to make films in 1980, so my background is 16 mm film. We never thought back then we would ever go so low as to work in video. I say that because I come from a very aesthetic background. As the years go on, as a filmmaker I care less and less about aesthetics and more and more about the emotion on screen - and I don't mean crying or getting angry. I mean, the difference between showing up and not showing up is really, really important.



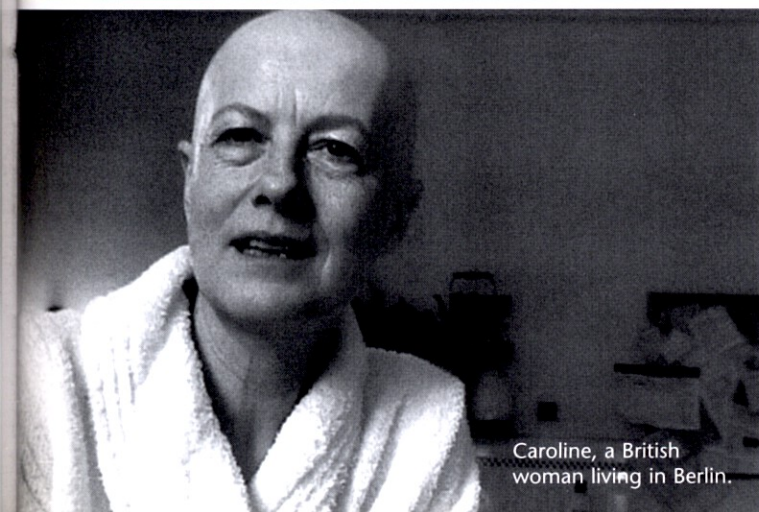
Khosi, her grandmother and son in Soweto, S.A.



Cambodian Prostitutes Union Meeting



Ijhan, an Egyptian woman living in France with her daughter.



Caroline, a British woman living in Berlin.

**Angelica:** What was it like to film your own family—was it qualitatively different or more awkward than shooting friends?

**Jennifer Fox:** It's a good example of where the technology let me enter into my family in a really unobtrusive way — passing actually changed the language of the film and its intimacy. My parents and my family are very private people. My mom really didn't want to be filmed, and she never would have thought that she could film something. But as soon as we started passing, she immediately became like, "give me that camera," because it was the opening for her to be able to break the rules and ask questions about my boyfriend she never would have been able to ask before, without the camera. You know, that generation is a little bit more formal and reserved than one would think.

## PART TWO: **DRAMATURGY AND STORYTELLING**

[Jennifer shows a clip from the sixth hour of the series, in which she flies home because her grandmother has been hospitalized; in this scene, she is talking with her mother and aunt in the hospital]. This is a great example of a scene with combined film languages. You have traditional *cinéma vérité*, you have the passing, and a third kind of filming: at one point, I actually had the camera on the table filming and nobody else was in the room but my grandma and myself. But when I say to my grandma, "did you dream?" my mom's filming that. When I think back, I can't believe she did that but throwing the camera around and integrating it into family life had become so natural that this very private moment was able to be filmed. Aesthetically it's also a beautiful shot. It's really ironic that when we went looking for funding for this film, all the broadcasters said it would never work because ordinary people can't film. Then I cut a sample tape, showed it to them, and it became a non-issue because, in fact, in our culture everybody can film.

**Angelica:** I'm assuming that in that particular scene, you wanted to show us the camera being transferred to another person, but most of the time you elide the wobble or swoosh as the camera is moving between bodies. How did you maintain sound continuity in the conversation?

**Jennifer Fox:** We only include the actual passing when it works for the drama of the story. Here, it shows how the camera is being used by my mom to get herself into the scene. Otherwise, I don't think the audience cares how we got these scenes. The technique is set up in the beginning, in the first hour: I say it, I show it once, and then we move on. In the passing that goes on for hours, sometimes when I'm talking I still have the camera in my hand and then we have a reaction shot of her. This is where the film is a construction, because we're using cutaways; if I didn't get the reaction shot during the conversation, afterwards I'll say, "let's just stop and film each other listening and going 'mhm,' to be sure that we have something for the edit room." You see it all over the place in this scene here, which was actually shot over two hours. [Shows another clip, where Jennifer is visiting her friend in Berlin, who has cancer. They talk about what it means to be in love.] There were a lot of moments where whoever was talking was actually behind rather than in front of the camera. That's what this little lavalier at the back is for. But with this technique, you're always in passing distance to each other, so you tend to get really good sound. Generally, the biggest



problem in filmmaking is sound. If you don't see something you can live with it, but if you can't hear it, you can't see it. And that is a really bizarre thing. You could have a really darkly lit shot and hear people going, "I love you," "no, I love you," and believe it. But if you can't hear them, if they're going [*moves lips as in a silent film*], it doesn't work. It's a funny irony, because we're capturing *moving images* but the sound is the most important thing. We had a few lines that we redid, actually, that are in voice-over. Now, what does this have to do with creating reality, which is about...

**John:** ... presence, unified field! [*Laughter*]

**Jennifer Fox:** Well, the first thing is, we have to capture these units that actually have people "showing up." The second thing is, we have to construct the film in a way that is true to some kind of ultimate truth—which is completely subjective. I mean, that particular scene did not actually end when the phone rings, but we ended there because it leaves you hanging—I think that was the most brilliant decision of my editor. I never would have made that cut because I hated that situation there. I remember being so pissed off that Caroline went and answered that bloody phone. And that is the emotion—that frustration that you're in the middle of this really important conversation and your girlfriend goes and answers the phone because she thinks it's her boyfriend. The decision to end the scene there, when in fact it didn't end there, is working with questions of dramaturgy, because you want the viewer to feel my dissatisfaction there and to not get resolution.

**Angelica:** You chose to work with Danish editor Niels Pagh Andersen because you were interested in what was coming out of Danish cinema. The set of rules that you came up with for yourself during filmmaking is reminiscent of the vow of chastity generated by Dogma 95...

**Jennifer Fox:** When I use the word *rules*, I'm totally stealing from the Danes. While I was working in South Africa, I met someone from the Danish Film Institute who was very inspired by my last film, a ten-hour piece called *An American Love Story* (US, 1999). He showed me these docs coming out of Denmark, including a really interesting and very personal film called *Family*, which is about two young Danish people. It actually doesn't relate to Dogma as we know it, since Dogma is about fiction, but Dogma is actually a knock off from the whole Danish documentary tradition. Anyway, *Family* (Sami Saif and Phi Ambo, 2001) won the Joris Ivens Award at IDFA, the International Documentary Film Festival in Amsterdam. The filmmakers are boyfriend and girlfriend in real life and she films him looking for his father. I was blown away because it had this really amazing presence, this intimacy and realness to it, and yet it also had a language and an aesthetic. I happened to see a few other Danish films with the same aesthetics and realized that they were actually teaching this style in Denmark. I got in touch with the head of the Danish film school, he invited me to do some lectures there, and I began to see that they're very, very evolved when it comes to personal filmmaking. I decided I wanted this new film to be a Danish co-production because the language that I'm working with has some relationship to theirs: so the co-producer was Danish, the editor was Danish, and since there was only one main American, we could kind of swing it. The real craftsman on the team was the editor. He brought a

strong storytelling sensibility to the project, and because I'm a very narrative-driven documentarist, we were a very good team. But most of what he did is not particularly Danish. The way he cut the scene we just saw with Caroline, for example, is simply the way you would cut a scene in narrative fiction. Here we see that passing the camera is a unique technique for documentaries, because it gives you that cross-cut effect you expect from fiction films. Normally, in documentary you just have one point of view because usually you're shooting with one camera.

Originally, this was supposed to be a 90-minute feature-length film, whose basic questions were: is there a common thread running through basically all female life, despite all these layers of difference? Is there a special language that women everywhere share? The problem was, I wasn't interested in making a didactic film; I was interested in telling stories and through stories we would discover that this was true. So, it couldn't be a talking-head film, even though the main idea was to pass the camera. It had to have real events and real time passing. I realized that if I was going to get all these layers in it, it would have to be several hours of film. So then we knew it would have to be a series. Niels was very keen, he really believed in that, whereas the Danish producer didn't have as much guts. In any case, I won't bore you with all the politics of fundraising and changing a film from a feature to a series. Once it became a series, the question was how do you structure it and organize the dramaturgy? Niels and I agreed it would have a serial dramatic structure, meaning that it had to open on a hook and whatever happened, it had to close on a hook. We didn't know at that moment how many units it would be, but we knew each needed to use the same dramaturgy.

At a certain point during the editing we were using *Sex and the City* (HBO, US, 1998-2004) as a formal model. I've always used different forms to model myself against. If you see my first film, *Beirut: The Last Home Movie* (it has the structure of a theatrical fiction film even though it's a doc. It's about a family and a palace and the war in Lebanon. It's completely out of Anton Chekhov's *Three Sisters* (1901). My second film, which is a 10-hour piece, is really modeled after the family sitcoms of the 70s, like the *Brady Bunch* (ABC, US, 1969-1974). With this one, we thought there were similarities to *Sex and the City*: it's an ensemble piece, meaning in this case, there are women that you meet and keep returning to over time, while other characters only come up once. We wanted to create an opening that would set up a dramatic problem that we would modify with each chapter. Now, I never thought I would use archival material in this film, but we took my family's archive, digitalized it, and actually logged it, in case we might use it. One of the first things Niels cut was the opening. We had some discussion, but he really cut it without me. Every episode begins with a different back story, a different archive story, and then we add new present story. I knew that we were going to start the film with the idea of flying—we had actually already titled the film *Flying* because I grew up flying. Although we wrote this text together, I never thought we'd put the archive in the beginning of the film and use it in every episode, because it actually doesn't match the language of the rest of the film. But it gives context to everything that follows after it. In fact, by frontloading the archive, Niels creates the subtext that will run through the entire series, namely that



everything I'm doing in my life is shaped by the fact that I never wanted to be a girl. It was really amazing for me to see this. Film is a collaborative medium and Niels brought a lot to this process. It's not just my interpretation of reality, it's also his. This would have been a completely different film with another editor. It's shocking! It's all about this relationship between us, and how we interpret the material together. There were some ways that he related to this story and other ways he didn't. He felt we were living parallel lives and that he was just as confused as a modern man as I was as a modern woman. He was also finding it very difficult, living outside the rules of what men are supposed to be, as well as trying to maintain the rules. But the later three hours of the film, where the more painful issues of being a woman are addressed—it was something he really didn't understand and it was a hard thing for me to explain and for us to work through.

**Angelica:** Related to that: in the field of documentary there are not that many successful or high-profile women documentarists. While that is obviously changing, you are one of the few women who has been successful to the point of being able to choose her projects. Were there particular models for you as you were developing your style and your persona over the last 20-25 years?

**Jennifer Fox:** You know, there are a lot of women in documentary, but not a lot at the top of the field. Invariably, when I do a panel—wherever I go—it's all men. We opened the film in Amsterdam, at the most important festival for docs and you look around and it's like, "come on, give me a break, there have to be more women!" It's scary. Think of Chris Hegedus: she was Don Alan Pennebaker's partner in crime for 20 years before anybody even knew her name. She only came on the scene in the last eight years or so and she's been making films for nearly 40 years. I wasn't influenced by other women documentary filmmakers, probably because I didn't know any that were ahead of me. So I feel influenced by a wider palette of artists than just documentary filmmakers; for example, by Lina Werthmueller, an Italian fiction filmmaker. In Chicago, recently, someone said, "You've got to go back and see *Yentl* (Barbra Streisand, US 1983)!" I first saw Barbra Streisand in *Funny Girl* (William Wyler, US, 1968) when I was nine years old and that was when I realized that I wanted to make films. It sounds funny in this day and age, but she was really a role model for me.

But to return to the topic of dramaturgy and resolution at the end of the film. We had so many balls in the air: my friends, the women around the world, the women I meet. I had these two characters with whom I had been struggling my whole life: my grandmother and my mom. At the end of the film, I come to some kind of acceptance of my mom and she gets fleshed out further as a character. But you can't do that with two people in this kind of film. So I feel like my grandmother got left a little as a stick figure. Of course, that's the way I felt her as a child. Now, as an adult I feel I reduced her and she isn't as multidimensional as she should be. This is where storytelling and real life come into big conflict. I feel like I owe my grandmother a film, if the truth be told. She died when she was 99 and a half. It's very hard, because film is so simplistic, even more so than a novel or a biography — until you work with it, you don't know how limited the medium really is. In the written word, you can

go wider, but in film you can actually say very little, people get reduced to very thin characters and issues. But the good news is that you do this because there is a strong need to create order and structure. We want our life simplified so we can see it better, because it literally is too complex. That's where anthropology comes in, studying how we define ourselves through storytelling.

**John:** What's not clear to me is, whether these exclusions are necessary just because that's the way narrative works? Or is that also what the market demands? If you had unlimited funds and could make any kind of film you wanted to, would you still feel the necessity to tell the story this way?

**Jennifer Fox:** I would definitely tell longer stories than the marketplace allows, I'm already pushing what the market will bear. Nobody would have thought that people would want to see six hours about how women speak. Honestly, there isn't another film out there like it, but I would still like to see longer, more complex stories — thicker, richer stories. However, I don't think it's the marketplace that completely determines the need for stories. If we go back in history, to Shakespeare or earlier, to cultures with an oral storytelling tradition, there's the same need to select and give order to a chaotic and overwhelming universe. Go through your day and see how many times you tell a story or hear a story. It will shock you. It's everywhere. All day long we're selecting, we're reducing, we're organizing —we're giving our lives narrative form!

#### Jennifer Fox Filmography:

##### Director:

*Fying: Confessions of a Free Woman*

(US/Denmark 2007, 353 min.)

*An American Love Story* (US, 1999, 300 min.)

*Beirut: The Last Home Movie* (US, 1987, 123 min.)

##### Co-Producer:

*Love & Diane* (US, Jennifer Dworkin, 2002, 155 min.)

*On the Ropes* (US, Nanette Burstein, Brett Morgan, 1999, 94 min.)

*Double Exposure* (CA, Nick Orchard, 1997, 30 min.)

*Project Ten: Real Stories From a Free South Africa* (South Africa, multiple directors, 2004, 274 min.)

*Cowboys, Lawyers, and Indians* (UK, Julia Dengel, Jonathan Oppenheim, 2006, 57 min.)

*Jennifer Fox's visit at the University of Toronto was made possible through generous funding from the Cinema Studies Institute, the Centre for Diaspora and Transnational Studies, and the Centre for Gender and Women's Studies.*

**Angelica Fenner** is Assistant Professor of German & Cinema Studies. Her publications have focused primarily upon migration and mobility in European cinemas, as well as on the contemporary surge of personal documentaries. She teaches an undergraduate survey course on documentary history and form and a graduate seminar on autobiographical non-fiction film, and is co-editing an anthology titled *Framing the Self: The Autobiographical 'Turn' in Germanophone Documentary*.



# Secret Identities

## THE SUPERHERO SIMULACRUM AND THE NATION

MATT YOCKEY

There is a sequence early on in Matthew Ogens' 2007 documentary *Confessions of a Superhero* in which one of its principle subjects, Christopher Dennis, sitting on a worn couch in a Superman costume, says, "I like to consider myself to be a historian of Superman and the keeper of artifacts." The moment is central to the film, which is a study of Dennis and three other performers who portray superheroes on Hollywood Boulevard and hustle tourists for tips. This shot of Dennis echoes the film's poster art, dvd cover, and dvd menu guide, in which he is lying on the same couch as if in mid therapy session. As with the film's title, the viewer is cued that this is a moment of potential insight into the mind of a fan who perhaps pathologically over-identifies with Superman, especially as portrayed by Christopher Reeve (Dennis bears a faint resemblance to the late actor). The image, along with an assortment of attributes expected of *cinéma vérité* (hand-held camera, direct address) promises the revelation of truth that is the domain of documentary film. Prior to Dennis making the assertion about his relationship to Superman, we see a series of shots of him donning his Superman costume in his modest apartment, which is crammed with a plethora of Superman merchandise. While images of Superman in a variety of incarnations (trading cards, coffee mugs, figurines, posters, curtains) dispassionately look on, Dennis squeezes his scrawny frame and flaccid belly into a skin-tight Superman costume. Ogens briefly cuts to a close-up of an ashtray festooned with butts beside a gift shop trophy that says, "Hollywood Hero of the Year." The irony is heavy, though Ogens seems to suggest that self-awareness is Dennis's Kryptonite.

The sequence articulates the manner in which Dennis sees himself and desires to be seen and how Ogens emphasizes the apparent disparity between self-image and how Hollywood tourists and the film's viewers might be inclined to see Dennis. Dennis asserts his cultural authority over Superman as a text, in fact writing himself onto the cultural palimpsest as another iteration of super-textual density that nourishes his sense of identity. What Dennis sees and what he wants others to see is superficially at odds with the inclination to view him as the proverbial troubled fan, the aficionado who takes his devotion to a partic-



ular strand of pop culture "too far." This moment is so compelling, however, because rather than negating Dennis's authority, it compels the viewer to confirm it. It is a moment of truth inasmuch as it underscores the mediated nature of truth and the liberating potential that comes with wholly embracing a version of reality that speaks to you. This is the power of the mediated superhero body reconfigured by the aesthetics of documentary filmmaking. The visual and visceral excesses of blockbuster superhero films are here remediated as a comparable excess conveyed via the body and the narrative context in which we are asked to read that body. Dennis wants us to read him as a certain kind of hero in relation to images of Superman, drawing upon familiar narrative tropes of sacrifice and the recognition of ourselves in his alterity. Ogens' deployment of reflexive docu-





'Superman' on Couch

mentary techniques actually reinforces Dennis's perspective rather than invalidates it. The viewer is brought closer to Dennis by virtue of the disparity between the ideal and the image, not despite it. In relentlessly pointing the camera at Dennis, and Dennis's unblinking response, his humanity emerges intact. Rather than allowing the viewer the cathartic distancing of the freak show, *Confessions* expands upon a cultural familiarity with and attraction to the superhero in order to suggest that the very instability that the superhero impersonator (and indeed the superhero) indicates is an assertion of a plurality essential to a postmodern American identity.

Writing of the documentary subject, Michael Chanan notes, "Being filmed is to give up your own authorship of yourself."<sup>1</sup> To some degree this is apparent in the way in which *Confessions*

treats its subjects, all of whom are seen in varying degrees as social misfits or dissatisfied souls pursuing the Hollywood Dream. Dennis himself is even marginalized by two of the other performers profiled in the film, Max Allen (Batman), who describes Dennis as "weird and out there," and Jennifer Gehrt (Wonder Woman), who characterizes him as a "train wreck." Dennis is the special subject par excellence and his claims as historian and archivist are potentially diluted when we see some of the prizes of his collection: soundtrack LPs of *Superman* and *Superman II* autographed by the films' casts and a crude cardboard diorama of his own construction (complete with modified action figures) of a scene from the 1978 *Superman*. These objects seem to place him as a social subject in the same place his Superman costume does: the category of the fanatic.

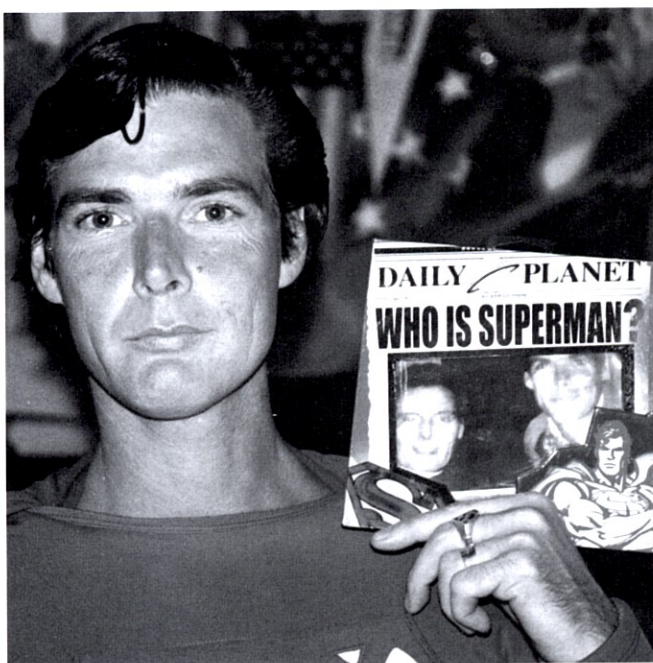
PHOTO: JOSEPH VILES



However, Dennis's earnestness penetrates the too easily maintained detachment between subject and audience. While Allen and Gehrt assert a distance from Dennis, they are also his friends and respect his commitment to the *idea* of Superman. At one point in the film *Superman* actress Margot Kidder, who has a friendly relationship with Dennis, defends him, saying, "There are a lot of awful things you can take too far and Superman's terrific so, hey, if you want to wear that outfit twenty-four hours a day, go for it. It's a lot more appealing than a lot of other things I can think of."

By willfully embedding himself into the Superman meta-text, Dennis compels you to reject or accept what he does, but, more importantly, he demands that you make social space for him, regardless of your feelings. In this regard, Dennis is a political agent, pushing the limits of social boundaries and, in doing so, affirming the pleasurable instabilities of the postmodern subject in America. In fact, he is radically actualizing the utopian promise of America: the proverbial life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness. This speaks to the essential tension of *Confessions*: Dennis's authorship of himself is predicated on being looked at by others in a very specific way that he determines. He can only be recognized as a social subject when seen and photographed, photographed and seen, not just by tourists on Hollywood Boulevard, but by Ogens and the film's viewers as well. We are thus complicit in Dennis's manufacturing of self. Whether we endorse what he does is incidental; what matters is that we are looking, for, as Dennis observes, "There's really no such thing as bad publicity. As long as it's publicity." And what he is publicizing is an image of ourselves, the mediated and mediating postmodern subject who defines him or herself in relation to mass culture. The project of *Confessions* is thus to reveal/not reveal the "true" Christopher Dennis. Is he really the son of actress Sandy Dennis as he claims (and her family denies)? Is he delusional and, if so, to what degree does he reflect our own delusions and disillusion about mass culture, American society, and personal identity? The questions Dennis provokes compel the viewer to confront that part of themselves mirrored in the simulacrum, for Dennis is not simply impersonating Superman or channeling a culturally constructed idea of Christopher Reeve, he is reflecting back to us our own ambivalent relationship with pop culture and our vexed identities as 21st century Americans.

As Bill Nichols observes, a documentary film is an "external trace of the production of meaning we undertake ourselves every day, every moment."<sup>2</sup> Thus the correspondence between Dennis's body and the body of the viewer is central to the film's discursive deconstruction and consequently self-conscious reaffirmation of the superhero ideal. This is the central tension that informs Dennis's persona, for the disparity between his real-life body and the imaginary body of Superman is so vast as to produce a kind of cognitive dissonance when we look upon him. However, Dennis's commitment to the Superman ideal, his vision of Superman reinscribed onto his own body, becomes a way in which Dennis articulates an American body politic which acknowledges and even embraces multiplicity as a paradoxical form of identity formation. The Superman emblem on his chest thus contains the sub-textual message, *E pluribus unum*. This, in fact, is the perennial symbolism of Superman in the comics and movies, expressed via mass commodity consumption. By repre-



senting a real-life American body that literally dons the Superman persona, *Confessions* penetrates the obscuring artifice generated by those commodities, in particular the special effects-laden movies starring Christopher Reeve. In his direct invocation of Reeve, Dennis directs a kind of x-ray vision onto this idealized pop culture figure (the condensed signifier of Superman the character and Christopher Reeve the actor) to reveal ourselves underneath. Dennis brings us closer to the utopian potential embodied by Superman by indicating a way in which we can all be like him—a transcendent figure reveling in the possibilities offered up by the intersection between popular culture and a democratic society.

While Dennis defines himself according to Superman meta-texts, Ogens foregrounds the manner in which we all produce individual meaning in relation to textual codes and systems by inserting footage of Sandy Dennis from *The Out of Towners* when Christopher Dennis first speaks about his purported background. Dennis himself stitches in another textual thread when he claims that he decided to attempt a career in acting per the deathbed wish of his mother. Thus he subtly invokes one of the primary narrative tropes of the superhero genre, the sacrificing son who is morally impelled to continue a family legacy. This is placed beside another thread within *Confessions'* textual network, footage of Sandy Dennis's niece, Pam Dennis, being interviewed by Ogens. In this sequence, Pam merely comments on the generosity of her aunt and makes no reference to Christopher. The sequence concludes with a close-up shot of Christopher on the couch maintaining that his mother was a very private person and did not want "a lot of this stuff out."

It is not clear what "this stuff" exactly is and here Ogens hints at a latent tension between Christopher and Pam Dennis's understanding of the truth. This is fully realized in the next two segments of the film to focus on Dennis, the first of which begins with footage of Antonio Banderas receiving a star on the "Hollywood Walk of Fame." Suddenly the space that we have previously seen occupied by Dennis as the imitation celebrity re-





Superman in the clutter.

PHOTOS: MATT OGENS

produces Dennis as the authentic fan, for he is among the throngs of people who have come to catch a glimpse of Banderas and his wife, Melanie Griffith. More importantly, Dennis is seen as the most vocal of fans, announcing to the crowd that Banderas's limousine has arrived and then shouting and jumping to get the attention of Banderas and Griffith. All of this proves successful for Dennis, as he gets Banderas's autograph, a fact he proudly announces to the camera. Tellingly, Dennis is wearing his Superman costume throughout, suggesting that Hollywood is simultaneously a work space and a recreational space, that, in fact, there is no fundamental division between his public and private selves, that the specific space of Hollywood in fact encourages such liminality. Such dissolution is affirmed by the familiar manner in which fans frequently engage with stars, the aura of intimacy generated by the cinematic and televisual image clinging to the social subject. This is exemplified here by Dennis's informal address of Banderas and Griffith and, later in the film, by his very friendly interactions with Kidder at a Superman convention in Metropolis, Illinois. It perhaps further explains Kidder's response to Dennis. His appropriation of an

iconic signifier and his passing resemblance to Christopher Reeve mark him quixotically as a "safe" subject. In his excess he generates an aura of familiarity as well as confirmation of the appeal of celebrity and the power of art.

Dennis wears his Superman costume in nearly every scene in which we see him, affirming this collapse of the public into the private and the leakage of the private into the public. Whether at work on Hollywood Boulevard or at home, he is in costume. He even wears it when he publicly proposes to his girlfriend Bonnie (at the Superman convention) and when they are later married. Both events take place in Metropolis, indicating the manner in which public space is conflated with private space via identification with mass culture. The small town of Metropolis has produced a modest tourist industry by virtue of its name alone (it bears no other tangible connection to Superman). Thus Dennis and the town are comparable texts, reinscribed and meant to be understood in relation to pop culture iconicity, each gesturing towards the collapse of sign and signifier manifested by Hollywood, the simulated space of iconicity, the shadow city in which Dennis as Christopher Reeve/Superman is as much an



indexical trace of the movie industry as hand and foot prints in the cement at Grauman's Chinese Theatre. Thus, per Benedict Anderson's notion of the nation as an "imagined community," here America is both imagined and imaginary when the foundational understanding of its meanings is derived from the movies. Thus a textual and cognitive incoherence is both produced and ameliorated by the collapse of sign and signifier.

Ogens introduces the segment on the Superman convention in Metropolis with a series of shots of this small town in southern Illinois that aesthetically evoke an 8mm home movie. Ogens juxtaposes comments by the town's mayor about his town's association with the character with images of weathered Superman signs and murals around the town, as if it is small-town specter of the Hollywood commodity-scape that dominates the rest of the film. This also speaks to the inherent tension between the comic book Metropolis (the bustling and vibrant equivalent of New York City) and this town, which, on the surface, more resembles Smallville (and, thus, a culturally produced idea of a generic "Middle America"). Even that association is undermined by an interview with a shirtless young man whose chest is emblazoned with a barbed wire and flame adorned Superman logo. He characterizes his town thusly: "Lot of drugs, stuff like that, around here. Criminal activity. Whole bunch. Dangerous little town, man. Really is. Lot of black people's moved here. Used to be none. But lots of black people moved in."

When Ogens asks him, "Why is everyone so obsessed with Superman here?" the young man replies, "You tell me. I been here all my life and I don't know. My comic books say New York. I don't know why they put Illinois in Metropolis." His accidental reversal of terms, Illinois in Metropolis, conveys a sense of the instability and incoherence produced by writing a pop culture text onto the surface of a small town that itself has escaped a more traditional and conservative understanding of the town's better (utopian) past (as indicated by his naked racism).

Ogens does not limit the significance of this instability and disparity to the space of Metropolis; rather it follows Dennis wherever he goes. The ambivalence that reinscription produces is revealed in an exchange between Dennis and a tourist on Hollywood Boulevard. While tipping Dennis, a young woman asks him if he does this all the time. His reply, "When I'm not working in movies and TV shows," prompts the woman to laugh and Dennis responds, "I'm serious. I'm also an actor." Ogens cuts to Dennis on the couch, where he elaborates: "Let's see, I've been in, like, eighteen movies, nine TV shows, four commercials, and a couple of music videos." Ogens then cuts to a clip of a film in which Dennis appears as an extra dancing in the background. The insertion of this textual thread confirms the incredulous attitude the viewer is expected to take regarding Dennis's claims. His body of work is what you might expect of someone whose primary strategy for becoming a rich and famous actor is dressing up as Superman on Hollywood Boulevard. It is a moment of easy disavowal; too easy, in fact, for while Ogens may superficially give the viewer an opportunity to mock Dennis, such an outcome is subverted by the larger context in which this meaning is produced. The revelation is utterly anti-climactic; we have already positioned Dennis at the margins of the entertainment industry because he has done so himself.

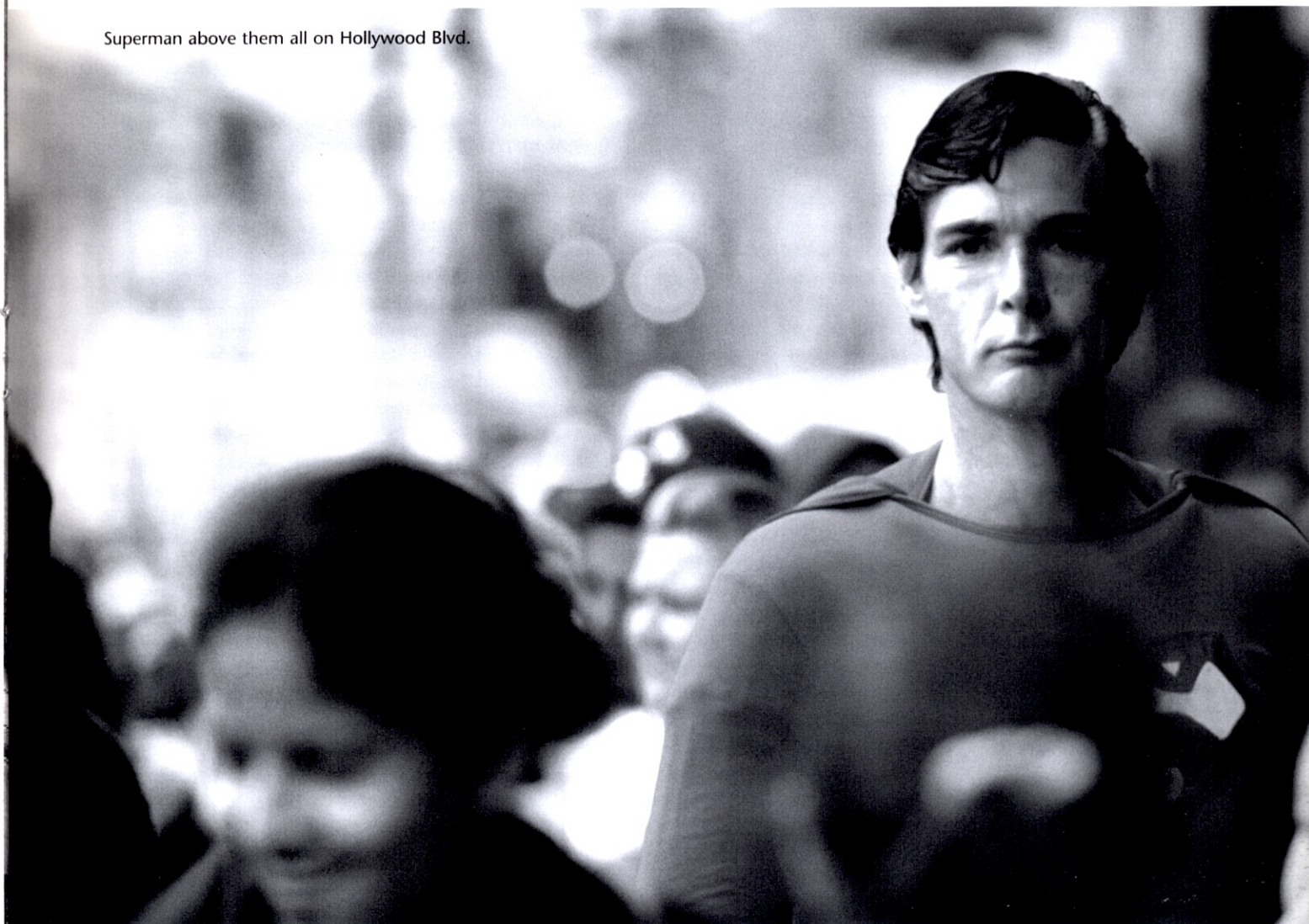
The only shock that could be produced here would be if we saw Dennis "really" acting in a "real" film. We use the same standards of "good" filmmaking that Dennis implicitly endorses through his devotion to the Christopher Reeve Superman films. The more deeply felt revelation at this point in the film, if we allow ourselves, is that Dennis's modest self-aggrandizing duplicates the ways in which we all re-produce ourselves to one another (and ourselves) as social subjects. The promise of a confession is the promise of revelation but disclosure always comes with a price. The confessor must be prepared to live with the knowledge being granted him or her and the intimacy the shared secret generates between confessing subject and confessor facilitates empathy. The confessional subject reveals, in part, because he or she believes the confessor will understand. The basis of such an understanding is self-recognition.

Dennis's utter zealotry by which he engages in his self-construction is thus enhanced by his Superman costume and Ogens suggests that it is just this earnestness that Pam Dennis charitably responds to in the following sequence. To emphasize the geographic (and ontological) distance between Christopher and Pam Dennis, the segment opens with a series of establishing shots of the countryside and then returns the viewer to the backyard setting that previously introduced the Dennis family. This time, however, Pam Dennis addresses Christopher's claims regarding her aunt. She examines a photo of him as Superman and remarks, "This is something that comes from his soul, it's what's driven him. Just like my aunt was an actress and it came from her soul and that's what she had to do." Though Pam ultimately expresses strong doubt regarding Christopher's assertion that he is Sandy's son, it is tinged with telling ambivalence. Not only does she apparently understand and seemingly admire what motivates Christopher, but she equates it with her aunt, echoing Christopher's explanation that acting is in his blood. Like Christopher himself, she makes him meaningful via Sandy Dennis as a textual template. Further, throughout this segment, Frank Dennis, Sandy's brother, sits impassively in the background, occasionally looking towards Pam but never making a comment. The lack of testimony from such a close relative, one who could presumably speak with some authority on Christopher's claims, can obviously be read in a number of ways, including an admission to the possibility that Christopher is telling the truth.

Thus the entire sequence, which, according to the culturally constructed logic of the "fan-as-other" narrative should confirm Christopher as the problematic social subject, does no such thing. It further invests him with ambiguity, not necessarily because it compels us to accept the possibility he is telling the truth, but because it informs us that, whether he is lying or not, this family has not, cannot, completely disavow him. This is the culture of celebrity as embedded within the familial narrative. Christopher is not regarded as threatening, simply as a possible liar. Pam says, turning to Frank, "I don't think she's his mother. I mean, when would she have had a baby?" We see no response from Frank. Instead Ogens cuts to a scene from *The Out of Towners*, in which Sandy Dennis's character finds a child lost in a park and declares, "Well, I'm not going to leave him." Ogens stitches together a number of textual threads here to confirm the manner in which we use cinema to sustain identity forma-



Superman above them all on Hollywood Blvd.



tions. Ogens deploys the simulacrum of Sandy Dennis as a reflexive defense of Christopher Dennis, placing the viewer in his subjective relationship to the actress. The underlying suggestion is that Sandy Dennis may not be his mother but that Sandy Dennis the doubly mediated simulacrum on the screen can be. Beneath this is the trace of Superman's foundling narrative, which haunts and reflexively validates the textual history Christopher presents.

To speak of a shared cultural memory of a pop culture myth as a haunting is to speak of presence through absence, which is a function of the simulacrum. The simulacrum reminds us of what it is *not* by virtue of our awareness of its mimetic qualities and in that revelation (the confession given up by the imitative body), we recognize the presence of the authentic. "Authentic" because it is a self-recognition; the phantasm in the mirror is us and thus no longer a phantasm. It is André Breton's surrealist dictum for the modern age, "*I dream, therefore, I am,*" as expressed by materialized cinematic subjectivity. Dennis embodies the ghost in the machine that digs below the rational consciousness of the movie-goer. He is our dream self, projected on the screen, come to life and, in then re-projected by Ogens, by Dennis, by ourselves, onto our mind's eye again. "Superman" as

a composite signifier takes on another layer of meaning, produces another iteration – Christopher Dennis – which, like the others, is grounded in, and grounds, our own subjectivity.

He is thus a Chimera, the hybridized real and unreal, a cyborgian composite of flesh and celluloid memory. Michael Chabon argues that the superhero costume "can be said not to exist, not to *want* to exist – can be said to advertise, to revel in, its own notional status."<sup>3</sup> The superhero costume, a signifier of hysterical overcompensation, always denotes a lack, but it is a lack that the public is meant to deny. Such denial, Chabon argues, becomes impossible when the superhero costume leaps from comic books and movie screens and onto real bodies. We are thus confronted with the costume's resistance to history, its essential nonexistence and mediated, constructed meanings. Thus, when the superhero costume in question is idealized as a consummately American one, as is Superman's, we are faced with the ahistoricity and imaginary status of America itself. In donning the Superman costume, Dennis asserts America as a postmodern space and Americans as postmodern subjects. Tellingly, we tacitly accept what he represents, and thus create social, cultural, and geographical spaces that he is expected to occupy (Hollywood Boulevard, Metropolis, Illinois). And while

PHOTO: CHARLIE GRUET



we allow ourselves the potential comforts of distance by restricting him to those spaces, he in fact becomes another reason to visit them. He is both Self and Other, as indicated by the tourist's desire to be photographed beside him, placing the Self with and separate from the Other simultaneously. By making him a primary subject of his film, Ogens does much the same, and by being self-conscious about his relationship to his subject, he finally brings the viewer closer to it. Thus the film opens with a series of still images of Hollywood, presented in a slide show style, as if we are looking at the photographic residue of an aunt and uncle's trip to the west coast, as if we ourselves are visiting Hollywood from middle America. The collision between two imaginary segments of America indicate a collision between history and memory.

The film is thus documenting an American subjectivity in familial and familiar terms that intersect with Dennis's own deployment of such tropes. Ogens brings this together vividly when he cuts to a sequence of shots of Dennis that approximate the look and affective aura of a home movie: square aspect ratio, grainy image, lack of diegetic sound. Over these images Dennis tells us, "I was born here in California. I decided that I was going to become an actor because my mother was an actress." His personal history is constructed as a generic American narrative of following family tradition, pursuing the American Dream within the Dream Factory that is Hollywood. Continuity with the past is doubly affirmed by his narrative and Ogens' aesthetic strategy, thus implicating his film in an ironic relationship with its subject, not simply Dennis but American identity and mass culture. The disparity between what Dennis says and what we see and how we see it distances rhetoric from (mediated) reality, bringing us closer to the subject, not further from it.

What further brings individual and national subjectivities together is the intimation of memory and the continual project of memory loss and recovery. This speaks to an important trope of many documentary films, the representation of crisis and its affective aftermath, what Nichols calls the restoration of magnitude. The question of representing crisis and thus restoring the degree of magnitude affectively produced by it is a problem for fiction film, which tends to reduced magnitude by narrativizing and aestheticizing crises. According to Nichols, documentary film is particularly well-equipped to circumvent the problems created by the formulaic narratives and spectacle of Hollywood cinema by foregrounding the tension between narrative, indexicality, and myth. The self-reflexive nature of documentary thus compels the viewer to look upon the documentary subject as one constructed according to narrative terms (Dennis as "character" in *Confessions*), as an indexical trace of historical time and real bodies (Dennis as a real person), and as an iteration of myth (Dennis as the Other). The inherent self-reflexive qualities of documentary are underscored in *Confessions* by the self-reflexive nature of its subject. It is a mediation of a mediation of a mediation into perpetuity. Dennis is a highly self-conscious narrativized and narrativizing agent and the film engages with mythic tropes within its own narrative structure, which then becomes a comment upon the function of mythologizing fictional characters and movie stars, thus deconstructing the magnitude-reducing qualities of spectacular blockbusters such as *Superman*.

The textual linkage Dennis asserts between himself and the

Christopher Reeve *Superman* films is suggestive of the layers of magnitude that are addressed within *Confessions*. Within the loose narrative of the film itself we have a primary magnitude expressed by Dennis, drug addiction, which informs a larger magnitude, death. This is articulated in a scene in which Dennis speaks of an epiphany he had one day while in a

speed-induced stupor: "I was sitting there watching TV and I see a death scene. For like an instant it was like I was seeing my own death, which, that was like a spiritual awakening." The historical subject recognizes his indexical trace within the narrativized space of the televisual. Ogens strongly suggests that this encounter with magnitude, the *penetration* of distancing aesthetics of Hollywood, informs Dennis's paradoxical immersion into a Hollywood-produced textual universe by then becoming a Superman/Christopher Reeve impersonator. He brings himself closer to the magnitude of death by embracing the iconicity of Superman and Christopher Reeve.

This is the deconstructivist power of the fan-as-producer and, by extension here, the deconstructivist significance of the documentary film as testimonial to this. This is compounded by the two other magnitudes in Dennis's life: the death of his mother (as he reports it) and the death of Christopher Reeve. He uses both as a means to more fully construct a mythologizing narrative that allows him social agency and historicity. Dennis recalls his reaction to the news of Reeve's death this way: "Chills ran up my spine right there. There's no way he could be dead. He's Superman. The Man of Steel himself. He -there's no way. He can't be dead. And I'm sure there's people out there who don't realize that Christopher Reeve has passed on. [voice cracks with emotion] So..." As with the death of his mother, Dennis reconfigures loss as access to meaning. The death of his mother impels him to become an actor, the death of Christopher Reeve to become something more than the term "impersonator" conveys. The death of a celebrity mother (possibly) and the real death of a celebrity made personal are understood here in relation to Dennis's own imagined death. In response he transforms himself into a kind of living tribute to the actor and his mother. Tellingly, Dennis expresses a more vividly emotional response to the death of Christopher Reeve than to the death of his mother. In this moment we witness the power of the Hollywood blockbuster to simultaneously acknowledge and repress magnitude. Further we see that it is the documentary film that more fully represents the magnitude of multiple losses that are rendered mythic in the text of *Superman*. The presence and absence of Reeve is contained within the figure of Dennis in costume

Dennis offers a solution that can only be realized by looking at him, thus the documentary fills in the gaps left over by the Hollywood blockbuster. The documentary resists closure, it affirms the ongoing power of mass culture to be absorbed and used by individuals to assert social agency. If the blockbuster superhero film evades death via iteration – the constant recycling of conflict between superhero and supervillain – *Confessions* confronts death via the remediation of the superhero body. Dennis simultaneously responds to the symbolic power of the superhero but also lays bare the manner in which we react to mass culture as a means of mediating our own deaths. This is emphasized by the confessional mode of documentary, which Nichols argues "grants us the power to extract



and manage (secret) knowledge – what the body knows but cannot openly say.”<sup>4</sup> Here we see the intersection between documentary and the representational strategies of the superhero film, in which the body is a perpetually unstable signifier, always in the process of accessing meaning, always eluding final meaning. The documentary pins down meaning by acknowledging its construction, both by the subject and by the filmmaker him or herself.

Central to this process is, to use Nichols’ term, vivification, the production of affect that exposes the contradictions that representational strategies of Hollywood films obscure. Vivification in *Confessions* is about the historicity underlying the representation, about the conflicting meanings that reside beneath the surface of the superhero costume in fiction films and the inherent contradictions of the superhero costume in reality. *Confessions* vivifies the tensions between the individual and mythology, between subject and society, between life and death. What requires vivification is not “the sound and fury of spectacle...but the experiential awareness of difference that, in the social construction of reality, has been knotted into contradiction.”<sup>5</sup>

In *Confessions* place becomes a central component of understanding and working through these contradictions. We understand bodies in this film in the context of place that is inherently unstable (whether Hollywood Boulevard or Metropolis, Illinois) but which also can be used to stabilize individual and collective identity. This is evident in a scene in which a police officer assigned to patrol Hollywood Boulevard indicates for Ogens’ camera the line between private and public property that the street performers cannot cross. There is, however, a gap between the two lines he points at and he says, “I’m not quite sure about the DMZ there, but, uh...” The inherent instability (multiple meanings/meaninglessness) of Hollywood Boulevard (and Hollywood more broadly as a culturally constructed space and idea) is exposed by the inability of social authority to fully apprehend this space. This is reinforced by the presence behind him of two signs in a storefront window that say “London” and “Tokyo.” The mutability of space gives agency to the mutability of individual subjects occupying that space. This sequence indicates the ongoing social need and desire to create and sustain boundaries, the inherent instability of those boundaries, and an essential attraction to liminality and the reorganization of social meaning.

Reflections on place inevitably bring us back to the ways in which *Confessions*, like most superhero texts, is engaging with the constructed nature and meaning of an American identity, America as a liminal space and an “in-between” state of mind, always transforming, always being reinvented, always in the process of becoming. The superhero indicates this by always being transformative; a primary element of the genre is the moment of transition from secret identity to superhero identity. Dennis, as the transparently average person inhabiting the Superman costume, bears the tension of the transformative moment perpetually. He is neither average nor super, but both. He is an identifiable figure because we understand this liminality as the inevitable symptom of modern American life in which the transformative qualities of the American zeitgeist are channeled through popular culture. The ongoing “becoming” of America has been historically understood in terms of utopian

ideals, which indicates the necessary place of bodies, and especially superhero bodies, in this process. Nichols confirms that the documentary film “is an active reassemblage of the body as the repository of personal meaning and of a utopian unconscious of collective values.”<sup>6</sup> In his appropriation of the Superman persona, Dennis indicates how Hollywood superhero blockbusters are comparable repositories. In documenting this, Ogens reveals the fluid relationship between mediations and subjects, between nation and citizens.

Such a relationship is made manifest by an image that appeared on the streets of Los Angeles in the month prior to the 2008 presidential election. It is a synthesis of an iconic image of Christopher Reeve as Superman and an image of Barack Obama. Here we see the space of Hollywood not as the Other space in contrast to a “real” America but as an iteration of the dream space that is all of America. Rather than a sharp dividing line between Hollywood and America, we see that mass culture (as represented by both Superman and Obama) reflects who we are by demonstrating the malleability of our own meaning to ourselves. The transformative properties of American identity are the paradoxical source of stable meaning in American society. With this hybrid image of Super-Obama we acknowledge the dualistic pleasure and fear that Obama’s socially constructed hybridity has provoked and inspired in Americans. He is both black and white; simultaneously from Kenya, Hawaii, Indonesia, Kansas, and Illinois; a Christian and, if some on the right were to be believed, a Muslim. By merging the fluid signifier “Obama” with the signifier of Christopher Reeve as Superman, we see the utopian promise of American democracy exposed as the underlying ethos of the transforming and transformative superhero and vice versa. Suddenly we are reminded that, despite his normative whiteness, Superman is an alien, the ultimate American immigrant, the consummate Other. By hybridizing him with Christopher Reeve’s Superman, we make Obama, and ourselves, more recognizable. It becomes a way of containing the cultural threat of his racial hybridity, or, better, a means by which we can celebrate that hybridity. Obama himself has exploited this by posing in front of the very same Superman statue in Metropolis, Illinois that Christopher Dennis was married beside. Both Obama and Dennis represent the “in-between-ness” of American society, the nation’s essential hybridity. Each is the Other assimilated into the Self, the Self embedded in the Other. If we accept one, surely we can – and must – accept the other.

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#### Notes

- 1 Michael Chanan, *The Politics of Documentary*, BFI, 2007, 215.
- 2 Bill Nichols, “The Voice of Documentary,” in *New Challenges for Documentary*, Alan Rosenthal, ed., University of California Press, 1988, 59.
- 3 Michael Chabon, “Secret Skin,” in *The New Yorker*, March 10, 2008.
- 4 Bill Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture*, Indiana University Press, 1994, 5.
- 5 Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*, Indiana University Press, 1991, 235.
- 6 Ibid, 264.



## Convergence Culture and the Caped Crusader

BATMAN AND THE ENVIRONMENT OF NEW MEDIA

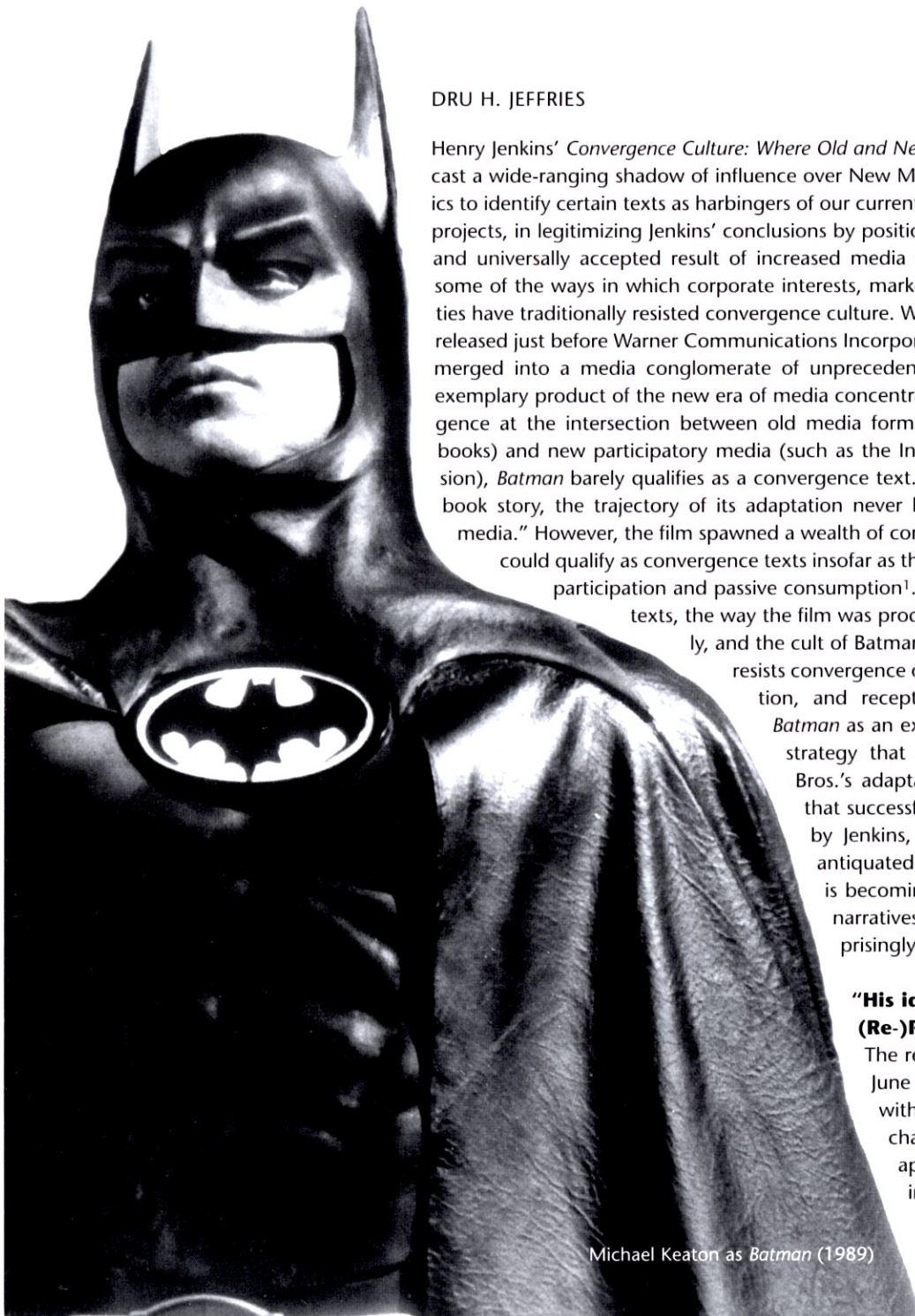
DRU H. JEFFRIES

Henry Jenkins' *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (2006) has already cast a wide-ranging shadow of influence over New Media studies, prompting many critics to identify certain texts as harbingers of our current state of media convergence. Such projects, in legitimizing Jenkins' conclusions by positioning convergence as an inevitable and universally accepted result of increased media synergy and hybridization, ignore some of the ways in which corporate interests, marketing strategies and fan communities have traditionally resisted convergence culture. Warner Bros.'s *Batman* (1989), a film released just before Warner Communications Incorporated (WCI) and Time Incorporated merged into a media conglomerate of unprecedented breadth (Time-Warner), is an exemplary product of the new era of media concentration. Since Jenkins locates convergence at the intersection between old media forms (such as films, television, comic books) and new participatory media (such as the Internet, video games, reality television), *Batman* barely qualifies as a convergence text. As a cinematic version of a comic book story, the trajectory of its adaptation never leaves the realm of so-called "old media." However, the film spawned a wealth of commercial intertexts, many of which could qualify as convergence texts insofar as they straddle the line between active participation and passive consumption<sup>1</sup>. By looking at some of these intertexts, the way the film was produced and marketed more generally, and the cult of Batman fandom, we can see how *Batman* resists convergence on the levels of production, promotion, and reception. Ultimately, I intend to use *Batman* as an exemplar of a corporate strategy—a strategy that continues to this day in Warner Bros.'s adaptations of DC Comics properties—that successfully resists convergence as defined by Jenkins, that holds on to an increasingly antiquated old media paradigm in an era that is becoming more and more hostile to such narratives, and that does so (perhaps surprisingly) to its own economic advantage.

### **"His identity remains unknown": (Re-)Producing a Hero**

The release of Warner Bros.'s *Batman* on June 23, 1989 was timed to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the character, who had made his first appearance in *Detective Comics* #27 in May of 1939. In that issue, Bob

Michael Keaton as *Batman* (1989)





Kane and Bill Finger's creation, then known as "The Bat-Man," is described as "a mysterious and adventurous figure fighting for righteousness and apprehending the wrong doer, in his lone battle against the evil forces of society... His identity remains unknown".<sup>2</sup> By the end of The Bat-Man's first published adventure, "The Case of the Chemical Syndicate," he has vanquished the "wrong doers" that plague the city that would later become known as Gotham, and his unlikely double-identity as socialite Bruce Wayne has been revealed to the reader. A mere eleven issues later, Robin "the Boy Wonder" is introduced as Batman's<sup>3</sup> "ally in his relentless fight against crime";<sup>4</sup> and in the spring of 1940, Batman's own comic title debuted. *Batman* #1 featured a short story entitled "The Legend of the Batman—Who He is and How He Came to be!" This two-page spread (which preceded the first appearance of the Joker in the pages that would follow), finally divulged the Batman's origin to curious readers. It was a simple, iconic story: while walking home from a movie, young Bruce's parents are robbed and killed by an anonymous mugger, after which the boy swears, "by the spirits of my parents to avenge their deaths by spending the rest of my life warring on all criminals."<sup>5</sup> He becomes a master scientist and trains his body "to physical perfection." "I am ready," he muses, "but first I must have a disguise." When a bat flies through the window of his study, it is the final piece of the puzzle. It is this simple piece of the Batman mythology, his origin, that has remained unchanged<sup>6</sup> over the years while almost every other aspect of the character has seen multiple, often contradictory, permutations.

The revisions began with the introduction of the Comics Code Authority (CCA), which functioned in comics analogously to how the Production Code Administration affected Hollywood films. Some of the CCA's dictates included:

**In every instance good shall triumph over evil and the criminal punished for his misdeeds.  
Crimes shall never be presented in such a way as to promote distrust in the forces of law and justice...  
All lurid, unsavoury, gruesome illustrations shall be eliminated.  
All situations dealing with the family unit should have as their ultimate goal the protection of the children and family life. In no way shall the breaking of the moral code be depicted as rewarding.**<sup>7</sup>

All comics had to be submitted for CCA approval from 1955 on, resulting in some marked differences in the kinds of situations that Batman's writers could place him in. Replacing the gritty detective stories that established the character's reputation (and that differentiated him from similar characters like Superman), "Batman stories became lighter and more fantastic."<sup>8</sup> Batman routinely travelled to other planets, as well as backwards and forwards in time. The Joker went from being a gleefully homicidal maniac to someone who gleefully stole children's report cards. Jack Schiff, then editor of DC Comics, said "Science-fiction had no place in Batman... it was out of character."<sup>9</sup> Indeed, these stories were out-of-step with the kinds of narratives that had theretofore defined readers' experience with Batman, but the conditions of censorship seemingly necessitated an overhaul of the character

itself in order to keep him commercially viable. This "re-branding" of Batman as a family-friendly crime-fighter was the first of many such attempts to keep the character relevant, and therefore a saleable commodity, by modifying his identity.

In the 1960s, the science-fiction fad had run its course, prompting a return to the so-called "old villains" (such as the Joker and the Riddler) and an updated look for the hero (including the introduction of the yellow oval on his chest, which has since become arguably the most recognizable element of the character) in *Batman* #164.<sup>10</sup> The comics for this era were, however, closer in tone to the television series that they inspired—a campy, pop-art adventure-comedy starring Adam West that aired for three seasons on the American Broadcast Corporation (ABC)—than they were to the original Kane issues of the late thirties and early forties. After the massive popularity of the television show fizzled out, DC responded to fan complaints that "Batman had become clownish"<sup>11</sup> by hiring artist Neal Adams and writer Dennis O'Neill to revamp the character once again: "What I did then was to hark back to the original intent of the Bob Kane character, to have this figure lurking in the shadows... I drew Batman as he *should* be drawn."<sup>12</sup> Adams' comments are indicative of many Bat-fans' feelings that there is a right and wrong interpretation of the character.

*Batman* executive producers Michael Uslan and Benjamin Melniker purchased the film rights to the character in October 1979,<sup>13</sup> which by that time encompassed Kane's "weird figure of the dark",<sup>14</sup> West's clownish do-gooder, and several iterations between these two extremes. The producers' intention was to "bring the *definitive* Batman to the screen in a serious treatment based on Bob Kane's original concept":<sup>15</sup> note that the idea of the "definitive" is inextricably tied to the idea of the "original," as it typically is when Bat-fans discuss their hero. Uslan was placed in the bind of wanting to satisfy his desire to see the definitive/original Batman on screen without alienating those fans whose preferred iteration of the character deviates from the original. Without getting too far into the film's reception by fans and critics, it has been suggested that Uslan's compromise was a failure: one reviewer from the time writes, "From the final, dark *Batman* script written by Sam Hamm, to the up beat shooting script doctored by Warren Skaaren, Batman loses his paranoid fears... And that may leave some comic-book devotees disappointed."<sup>16</sup>

By the time the film was in production, it was the dark, brooding vigilante version of Batman that had the most cultural caché; Frank Miller's graphic novels, *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) and its follow-up *Batman: Year One*, were darker and grittier than even Kane's original conception of the character. Also, Alan Moore's 1988 comic *The Killing Joke* reinstated the sadistic side of the Joker's psychotic personality and even, for the first time, explained the origins of the character. It was the commercial success of these stories that proved to Warner Bros. that general audiences were willing to accept a darker, more serious Batman on screen.<sup>17</sup> However, the film's interpretation of the character also needed to appeal to the baby-boomers that grew up with the TV show as well as the younger generation that was being exposed to the Miller-ized dark knight: "a pop culture movie, such as 'Batman', can be new and exciting to kids as well



Michael Keaton as *Batman* (1989)





as nostalgic for adults" said Uslan.<sup>18</sup> However, when compromising between the light and dark versions of the character, the producers gave the impression that they "didn't seem sure which Batman they wanted."<sup>19</sup> Thus, instead of a return to the original, Uslan and Melniker commissioned yet another new interpretation of the character—one that wore black body armour rather than grey spandex, killed anonymous criminals without remorse, and had sex on the first date.

With all of the various media in which iterations of the Batman character made appearances by the time of the film's release in 1989, *Batman* could easily be mistaken for part of a transmedia narrative—that is, one that "unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole."<sup>20</sup> In such a configuration, *Batman* would be read as an extension of the comics, the television shows, and the previous film serials, all of which would work together to form a complex, interconnected narrative. This assumes, however, a consistent and coherent treatment of the character over these multiple media, in which the film is only one part of a larger whole. Batman's introduction—or lack thereof—at the outset of the film might seem to support this erroneous interpretation of Warner Bros.'s *modus operandi*. Because we are not given an explanation for Batman's presence right away—he simply exists—we might want to compare his representation to that of a mythic figure: "When the Greeks heard stories about Odysseus, they didn't need to be told who he was, where he came from, or what his mission was."<sup>21</sup> As in transmedia narratives, our familiarity with the character is assumed by the filmmakers: "characters in transmedia stories do not need to be introduced so much as reintroduced, because they are known from other sources."<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, attempts at understanding the film in this way are doomed to failure, because Burton's film exists in a narrative universe separate from the comics, from the serials, and from the television show. By choosing to "re-invent" Batman, instead of maintaining continuity with one of the previous iterations of the character, Warner Bros. made a conscious decision against what would come to be known as convergence in favour of a corporate strategy that, by allowing competing versions of a character to exist in conflict with each other, emphasizes the *idea* (or brand) of Batman over any one specific interpretation. This strategy has its benefits: for instance, while *Batman*'s PG-13 rating necessarily kept some younger children out of theatres, by keeping the West-styled Batman in circulation, Warner Bros. could sell *Batman* to this younger demographic (not to mention the baby-boomers who grew up on the show but were unfamiliar with the comics). Quite simply, the less specific Warner Bros.'s definition of the character, the more people it could be sold to.

This issue speaks to the nature of the branding. In convergence culture, we are used to brands representing a single, fixed identity that consumers can easily identify, and thus identify with. In this case, Warner Bros. owns a brand—Batman—but that brand does not represent a single, stable meaning: as Tony Bennett wrote in his foreword to *The Many Lives of the Batman*, Batman is a constantly shifting signifier that "has been subject to a constant process of redefinition."<sup>23</sup> How then does Warner Bros. market that brand? This is the issue that we will look at presently.

### "I want you to tell all your friends about me": The Marketing of the Bat-Brand

The marketing of *Batman* has been described as "a textbook example of symbiosis between movie promotion and product licensing."<sup>24</sup> That is because the two processes were virtually inseparable from each other: every Bat-product, whether it bore the film's distinct logo or its comic book counterpart, advertised both the film and the Bat-brand in general; and with a \$10 million advertising budget, it seems that the film did not need much additional support in the marketplace.<sup>25</sup> 1989 was dubbed "the year of the bat" by *Variety*;<sup>26</sup> Bat-products began to flood store shelves long before the film's June release. With "more than 100 licensees for Batman products... [making] about 300 different items" (Barol 74),<sup>27</sup> about a quarter of which were completely unrelated to the film version of the character, one comic store owner remarked that "'Batman: The Merchandising' is such a huge phenomenon... that it may burst free of 'Batman: The Movie.'"<sup>28</sup> In New York, the logo was ubiquitous,<sup>29</sup> appearing on billboards and store shelves; young men even shaved and dyed it onto the backs of their heads. This phenomenon came to be universally known as "Batmania."

That Batmania gripped the world with such ferocity is strange considering Batman's low popularity as late as early 1989. In a national survey reported by the *Los Angeles Times* in February of that year, Batman rated "below average" in terms of popularity, "slightly below... Deputy Dawg, Betty Boop... even Chicken Little."<sup>30</sup> The California Raisins, who topped the list, were four times more popular than Batman.<sup>31</sup> And yet, only four months later *Newsweek* reported that Batmania had become even "*bigger than the California Raisins*."<sup>32</sup> It is difficult to explain such a radical shift in public interest, but Warner Bros.'s marketing campaign for the film undeniably played a part: they released a 90-second trailer before any footage of the film had been shot, followed by a "no-name" promotional poster that bore only the film's logo. Fans went wild with anticipation, and "[the rest was] self-generating hysteria, not paid hype."<sup>33</sup> It may be impossible to determine *why* fans embraced Batman with such intensity at this time; the fact is, however, that they did, and WCI was in a position to make a lot of money off of Batmania.

The concentration of media power at WCI allowed the horizontally integrated conglomerate to market *Batman* on every available media platform. According to an article in the *Toronto Star*, this "allows one company to take the same basic product and make money with it over and over again in different media."<sup>34</sup> This is certainly the approach favoured by WCI in marketing *Batman*, though it is an approach that runs contrary to the nature of both transmedia storytelling and media convergence more generally. Jenkins writes, "Redundancy burns up fan interest and causes franchises to fail."<sup>35</sup> In transmedia storytelling, each text in a franchise should contribute significantly to the understanding of the same narrative universe, if not the advancement of the narrative proper. We have already seen that Warner Bros.'s *Batman* universe is distinct from DC Comics' *Batman* universe, which is itself distinct from the ABC television series' universe. Furthermore, no text that was released as a tie-in to the *Batman* film developed or enhanced one's understanding of or participation with the film's narrative universe. A tie-in



book called *The Further Adventures of Batman* promised to tell the story of “what happens next” in the *Batman* film universe in its fourteen short stories; instead, the book, with contributions from Isaac Asimov among others, is closer in content to the outlandish sci-fi-inflected plots of the 1950s comics: “there are all sorts of improbable problems, including pirates, a curvaceous psychiatrist (when Wayne seems to go batty),<sup>36</sup> an ancient god, and movie mogul David O. Selznick.”<sup>37</sup> At the time of its release, the book quickly became “the fastest-selling multiple-author anthology ever.”<sup>38</sup> The straight novelization of the film by Craig Shaw Gardner sold even more rapidly, though one reviewer wondered “why anyone would want only-the-plot of a movie that has everything going for it *but* the plot. Maybe people hope the book will tie together the movie’s frizz of loose ends. It doesn’t.”<sup>39</sup> If consumers read either of these books<sup>40</sup> to extend their engagement with the film, they were met with either narrative redundancy or irrelevancy, either of which, according to Jenkins, should have frustrated fans and consequently caused the franchise as a whole to fail. And yet these products, like the film, broke sales records.

Batmania would not have occurred if not for the degree of synergy afforded by WCI’s horizontal integration and media concentration. According to Jenkins,

**Industry insiders use the term ‘extension’ to refer to their efforts to expand the potential markets by moving content across different delivery systems, ‘synergy’ to refer to the economic opportunities represented by their ability to own and control all of those manifestations, and ‘franchise’ to refer to their coordinated effort to brand and market fictional content under these new conditions. Extension, synergy, and franchising are pushing media industries to embrace convergence.<sup>41</sup>**

We can easily discern how WCI applied these techniques in their marketing of *Batman*. The film’s content was “extended” from cinema screens to the printed page, action figures, a video game, and countless other tie-in products, all of which created a profit for the studio because they either owned the various outlets that produced these products or sold the licensing rights to outside companies. These products, however, do not extend the narrative value of the film text, but merely regurgitate it in different media. Jenkins speaks of brand loyalty as a cornerstone of successful marketing;<sup>42</sup> in this case, Bat-fans loyally purchased tie-in products that bore the Bat-logo despite their lack of narrative value to the franchise.

**“I don’t know if it’s art... but I like it!”:**

#### **Reception in Bat-Fandom<sup>43</sup>**

All of the issues that have been discussed so far—convergence culture, the history of Batman, and the Batmania of 1989—depend upon the consumer’s engagement with the media content presented to them; thus, the reception of *Batman* and the nature of Bat-fandom are pivotal issues to explore, especially given the privileged position of the consumer in convergence culture. Jenkins writes that he has recently “watched fans move from the invisible margins of popular culture and into the cen-

ter of current thinking about media production and consumption”;<sup>44</sup> this increased emphasis on the fan does not occur until much later than *Batman*, but the cult of Bat-fandom had been in existence long before 1989. And Bat-fans had plenty to say about Warner Bros.’s interpretation of the character.

The most notable incidence of fan participation in the production of the film was the campaign to get actor Michael Keaton out of the Bat-suit. The comedic actor had not proven himself as a dramatic actor to most Bat-fans—and even those that had seen his dramatic turn in *Clean and Sober* (1988) could still deride his physical stature: “Kane had drawn a Batman who was ‘a big hunk, 6’2”, square-jawed, a young Cary Grant.’ The director picked Michael Keaton, 5 feet 10 inches tall with a receding hairline and ‘not the squarest jaw in town,’ to play Batman.”<sup>45</sup> These reverent comparisons to the “original” imply that fans expect continuity between the various media in which Batman is represented; but given the character’s history up to this point, could they honestly expect anything less than yet another re-invention?

The fact of the matter is that the Batman brand is owned by WCI to do with whatever they choose; and as we have seen, what they choose is determined largely by what is most likely to yield a profit rather than what will reward devoted fans that engage most fully with the media content. Jenkins’ example of Lucasfilm is an interesting counterpoint to our analysis of Bat-fandom. George Lucas’s *Star Wars* universe is seven feature films deep, with several animated television series, comic books, video games, encyclopaedias and novels working in concert with the films to form a unified, complex, intertextual, and multimedia narrative world. *Star Wars* fans, supposedly still unsatisfied with the wealth of material, decide to make their own contributions to the universe by creating fan films. This, says vice-president of marketing for Lucasfilm Jim Ward, is counterintuitive to fandom: “We’ve been very clear all along on where we draw the line. We love our fans. We want them to have fun. But if in fact somebody is using our characters to create a story unto itself, that’s not in the spirit of what we think fandom is about. Fandom is about celebrating the story the way it is.”<sup>46</sup> Jenkins takes issue with Ward’s definition of fandom, but this is very close to how we might define Bat-fandom, particularly as the phenomenon relates to film adaptations. As we have seen, fans typically revere the original. Fandom’s collective ire is thus raised when the original is contradicted, resulting in a sort of cognitive dissonance within the franchise—for instance, when the film *Batman* is played by a short, non-athletic actor rather than a tall, muscular actor that more closely matches the comic book original. Fans *do* celebrate the story the way it is, and thus pass value judgments on new versions based on whether “they” (in this case, Warner Bros.) got it “right” (i.e. copied the original) or “wrong” (i.e. deviated from the original). This kind of attitude is counterintuitive to convergence culture because it places all of the power in the hands of the media producers and franchise owners. Though Jenkins writes that “Fans reject the idea of a definitive version produced, authorized, and regulated by some media conglomerate”,<sup>47</sup> Bat-fans actually revere the original version as the *definitive* version, regardless of who regulates it. He goes on: “Fandom, after all, is born of a balance between fascination and frustration: if media content didn’t fas-



Batman/ Val Kilmer and Robin/ Chris O'Donnell in *Batman Forever* (1995)







Batman/ George Clooney and Robin/ Chris O'Donnell  
in *Batman and Robin* (1997)

ciate us, there would be no desire to engage with it; but if it didn't frustrate us on some level, there would be no drive to rewrite or remake it."<sup>48</sup> Bat-fans are more frustrated with corporations' attempts to rewrite and remake the media content that they love than they are with the original content itself.<sup>49</sup> But their strong identification with the Bat-brand nevertheless obligates them to purchase the Bat-products being sold, regardless of their degree of authenticity to the original.

Furthermore, Bat-fans have less of a need to engage in activities that rewrite the Bat-universe, such as fan fiction and fan films, because there is no lack of competing interpretations of their favourite character in the official franchise.<sup>50</sup> With so many official iterations of Batman, the line between authorized and unauthorized Batman narratives is remarkably indistinct because neither necessarily takes place in continuity with the established narrative universe—if we can even speak of such a thing. Unlike *Star Wars* fans, Bat-fans need not leave the corporate-controlled franchise to "value the sheer diversity of versions of the same characters and situations";<sup>51</sup> the franchise itself provides them with what they would, in convergence culture, have to create themselves.

#### **Back to the Batcave:**

##### **Convergence Culture and the Caped Crusader**

In terms of franchise coherence and competing interpretations, Batman is a more complex character today than he ever has been. The film series initiated by Warner Bros. in 1989 yielded three follow-up features—*Batman Returns* (1992), *Batman*

*Forever* (1995) and *Batman & Robin* (1997)—the last of which finally killed the saleability of the franchise. In 2005, a new film series helmed by director Christopher Nolan, *Batman Begins*, once again re-invented the character and his universe. The sequel to this film, *The Dark Knight*, went on to become the most financially successful film of 2008 and the second highest-grossing film of all-time. There can be no debate as to Warner Bros.'s success with the Batman franchise; nevertheless, it is unclear how successful they have differentiated these brands of Batman on film. Jack Nicholson, who played the Joker in Burton's film, was reportedly "furious" at not being asked to play the Joker in *The Dark Knight*: "They never asked me about a sequel with the Joker. I know how to do that! Nobody ever asked me."<sup>52</sup> His anger stems from the erroneous assumption that *The Dark Knight* would be a sequel to 1989's *Batman*, when they actually exist in distinct narrative universes. For a time, Warner Bros. was also developing a film to be directed by George Miller called *Justice League: Mortal*, which would narrativize the DC Comics superhero team featuring Superman, Wonder Woman and Batman. It was reported, however, that Christian Bale—the actor that fills the Bat-suit in Nolan's films—would not be asked to appear in the film, and that the movie would represent yet another separate film version of the character (Garrett), this time played by twenty-two year-old actor Armie Hammer. These franchises were to exist concurrently with each other until Warner Bros., in deference to Nolan's success with the Batman character, backed away from the project.



Fans are aware of these issues in continuity, but are casual consumers? In an age wherein transmedia storytelling is becoming the norm, consumers expect to be able to make meaningful connections across different media should they choose to do so. It is possible that the average moviegoer would simply be confused by the lack of continuity between Miller's proposed *Justice League* film and Nolan's concurrent Bat-films, not realizing that the competing versions of the character were not meant to be compatible. Even though Warner Bros. ultimately decided against *Justice League*, they continue to keep multiple iterations of Batman in the marketplace—in comics (across titles like *Batman*, *Detective Comics* and various mini-series and graphic novels), television (in cartoons like *The Batman* and *Batman: The Brave and the Bold*) and films (in Nolan's films, as well as straight-to-DVD features like *Justice League: The New Frontier*)—regardless of the potential for franchise incoherence. A 1989 article in *The Globe and Mail* quoted one fan: "I'm going to see *Batman*... But it has nothing to do with the comic book—absolutely nothing."<sup>53</sup> Whether consumers trained in convergence will continue to tolerate films that have "nothing to do" with the comic books, or even with the other films, remains to be seen.

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#### Notes

- 1 I am thinking here of a new media product like *Batman: The Video Game* for Nintendo (SunSoft 1989), which is participatory by its very nature but nevertheless does not extend or enhance the player's relationship to the film narrative. Action figures are another example of a tie-in product that encourages participation without necessarily extending the experience of the film's world.
- 2 Finger, Bill. "The Case of the Chemical Syndicate." *The Batman Chronicles, Volume One*. (New York: DC Comics, 2005.): 4. Though Kane is credited as the sole author in the comic itself, the table of contents in *The Batman Chronicles* anthology that I am referencing lists Finger as the writer, with Kane receiving cover art, pencils and ink credits.
- 3 The hyphen had been dropped by August of 1939.
- 4 Finger, Bill. "Introducing Robin, the Boy Wonder." *The Batman Chronicles, Volume One*. (New York: DC Comics, 2005.): 124.
- 5 Finger, Bill. "The Legend of the Batman—Who He Is and How He Came To Be." *The Batman Chronicles, Volume One*. (New York: DC Comics, 2005.): 139.
- 6 It has, however, been re-told and expanded upon in stories such as Frank Miller's *Batman: Year One* (New York: DC Comics, 1988). For example, the anonymous mugger is given an identity in Joe Chill, and the movie that the Waynes are walking home from is identified as the 1920 Douglas Fairbanks film *The Mark of Zorro* (Miller 1988: 21).
- 7 Quoted in Boichel, Bill. "Batman: Commodity as Myth." *The Many Lives of the Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and his Media*. Eds. Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio. (New York: Routledge, 1991): 13.
- 8 Sciacca, Thom. "Batman: The Comic Connection." *Variety*. June 28, 1989: 6.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid: 7.
- 12 Adams, quoted in Ibid. My emphasis.
- 13 Cohn, Lawrence. "'Batman' a 10-year journey for Uslan and Melniker; exec's next game: 'Monopoly.'" *Variety*. June 7, 1989: 5.
- 14 Finger, Bill. "The Legend of the Batman—Who He Is and How He Came To Be." *The Batman Chronicles, Volume One*. (New York: DC Comics, 2005.): 139.
- 15 Uslan, quoted in Cohn 1989: 6. My emphasis.
- 16 Horn, John. "Cashing in on old friends..." *The Globe and Mail*. June 19, 1989.
- 17 Sharrett, Christopher. "Batman and the Twilight of the Idols: An Interview with Frank Miller." *The Many Lives of the Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and his Media*. Eds. Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio. (New York: Routledge, 1991.): 34.
- 18 Cohn 1989: 5.
- 19 Horn 1989.
- 20 Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. (New York: New York University Press, 2006.): 95.
- 21 Ibid: 119.
- 22 Ibid: 120.
- 23 Bennett, Tony. "Foreword." *The Many Lives of the Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and his Media*. Eds. Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio. (New York: Routledge, 1991.): viii.
- 24 Murray Altmeyer, quoted in Gold, Richard. "Gotham City going Batty as Warner preps for return of the Caped Crusader." *Variety*. May 31, 1989: 5.
- 25 For 1989, this was a very large advertising budget. Indeed, the film's production budget was only three times this amount.
- 26 Putzer, Gerald. "B.O. blasts off in year of the bat." *Variety*. January 3, 1990: 1.
- 27 Quoted in Barol, Bill. "Batmania." *Newsweek*. June 26, 1989: 74.
- 28 Quoted in Ibid.
- 29 Gold 1989: 5.
- 30 Horovitz, Bruce. "Holy Tie-In! Batman Bores Consumers Just as Retailers Prepare for Film." *Los Angeles Times*. February 26, 1989: 6.
- 31 Steven Levitt, president of Marketing Evaluation Inc., said of the survey's results: "if I had a chance to make a Batman lamp or an Alf lamp, I'd run like hell to Lorimar to make an Alf lamp and run the other way from Batman" (Horovitz 6).
- 32 Barol 1989: 70. Emphasis in original.
- 33 Kirkland, Bruce. "'Batstuff': Hype and hysteria." *Toronto Star*. June 22, 1989.
- 34 Gnoffo Jr., Anthony. "Warner finds that Batman pays off more ways than one." *Toronto Star*. August 7, 1989.
- 35 Jenkins 2006: 96.
- 36 This actually sounds similar to Nicole Kidman's role in *Batman Forever* (1995).
- 37 Penfield III, Wilder. "Turning more pages on a Dark Knight." *Toronto Star*. July 13, 1989.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 There was also a graphic novel adaptation of the film, which only reproduced "shots of the film with slight variation in plot and pictorals." Meehan, Eileen. "'Holy Commodity Fetish, Batman!': The Political Economy of a Commercial Intertext." *The Many Lives of the Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and his Media*. Eds. Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio. (New York: Routledge, 1991.): 55.
- 41 Jenkins 2006: 19.
- 42 Interestingly, one of his case studies in this chapter is Coca-Cola's affiliation with *American Idol*. Diet Coke had a very visible campaign that tied-in to *Batman* featuring Michael Gough reprising his role of Alfred. One of the 30-second TV spots even appeared on the *Batman* VHS released in November 1989. Parisi, Paula. "'Batman' enlists in cola wars: Diet Coke ad to kick off video." *The Hollywood Reporter*. September 5, 1989: 1.
- 43 This section deals specifically with the reception of the film within the Batman fan community, rather than in the general public. For a broader analysis of *Batman's* reception, see "Batman: The Ethnography" by Camille Bacon-Smith and Tyrone Yarborough In *The Many Lives of the Batman: The Many Lives of the Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and his Media*. Eds. Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio. (New York: Routledge, 1991.): 90-116.
- 44 Jenkins 2006: 12.
- 45 Barol 1989: 72.
- 46 Quoted in Jenkins 2006: 149.
- 47 Ibid: 256.
- 48 Ibid: 247.
- 49 I believe that this is true of *Star Wars* as well, and that Jenkins misreads fans' motivations in creating fan films.
- 50 This is not to say that they do not make fan films for other reasons.
- 51 Ibid: 256.
- 52 Horowitz, Josh. "Jack Nicholson 'Furious' Over Heath Ledger Playing The Joker." *MTV Movie Newss*/1573617/20071106/story.jhtml
- 53 Horn 1989.



## On the Obama-ization of Will Smith

EDWARD D. BACAL

In *Hancock*, Will Smith's superhero film of the summer '08 blockbuster season, he plays John Hancock, a superhero who, in spite of his unsightly characteristics, nevertheless uses his super powers to uphold justice in the streets of America. While this is no extraordinary story in itself, what I find to be of note with *Hancock* is the way that the representations of its protagonist suit its contemporary social context; specifically, I am interested in how *Hancock*, released roughly four months prior to election day, and with its careful depictions of Will Smith, acted as a sort of de facto campaign ad for Barack Obama, another 'unlikely' hero, often regarded as a quasi-superhero for America. What I'd like to explore here is how, in light of the implications of releasing a film amid election hysteria that casts an African American man as a superhero, the respective images<sup>1</sup> of Will Smith and Obama come to parallel each other. Moreover, I'd like to explore how the development of these images, including the manifestations they take on within culture, cause them to merge, in a sense, thereby problematizing distinctions of identity and the visual forms it takes on.

A sort of non-superhero, whose unlikeliness itself is present in his vagrant-like appearance, particularly the colour of his skin (he being a sharp contrast to the white, middle- to upper-class Supermans and Batmans that make up the typical superhero grammar) one of the main challenges a character who looks like Hancock faces in playing a superhero is to overcome a less than favourable persona in order to satisfy the role itself. This is to say, in spite of his incongruity towards a deeply rooted type, Hancock has to be recognized and viewed as a superhero proper, just as the role of *American president*, as well, is far from exempt from these challenges of representation (it being another role typified by the upper class white male). Indeed, the notion of a president anything other than white is unprecedented, and was for many, unimaginable (or unacceptable), in spite of all the rhetoric of a purportedly post-racial America.

From here, I would argue that part of the function *Hancock* played was to ease the racial concerns of voters with

ambivalent conceptions of African Americans (particularly those viewers who draw from a rich repertoire of negative depictions of African Americans in the media, be it from your traditional derogatory representations, or from figures such as Blaxploitation anti-heroes like Shaft and Sweet Sweetback, who, in their assertively afrocentric attitudes are likely to be more discomforting than anything else to many a white viewer<sup>2</sup>). Hancock, despite his adverse appearance and unsavoury characteristics, is nevertheless cast as superhero, and America, post-racial or not, is ultimately better off with the auspices of his superpowers. This scenario, I feel, is reminiscent of much of the story of Obama's candidacy: to be elected into power and deliver change for the better, he has had to gain the trust and support of so much of an American population that still, on a conscious level or otherwise, typecasts blacks into the roles of an inferior other (which is to say not as their president). In short, *Hancock* plays out many of the anxieties concerning whether a black man can be trusted as president, as by re-presenting these racial tensions in a film<sup>3</sup> that shuffles the instituted structure of character types and roles, it attempts to ease such tensions by questioning them; in other words, despite the widely held negative and essentialist conceptions of African Americans, they *can* be superheroes, and they *can* be presidents.

The situation, however, becomes especially curious with the



Will Smith in *Hancock*

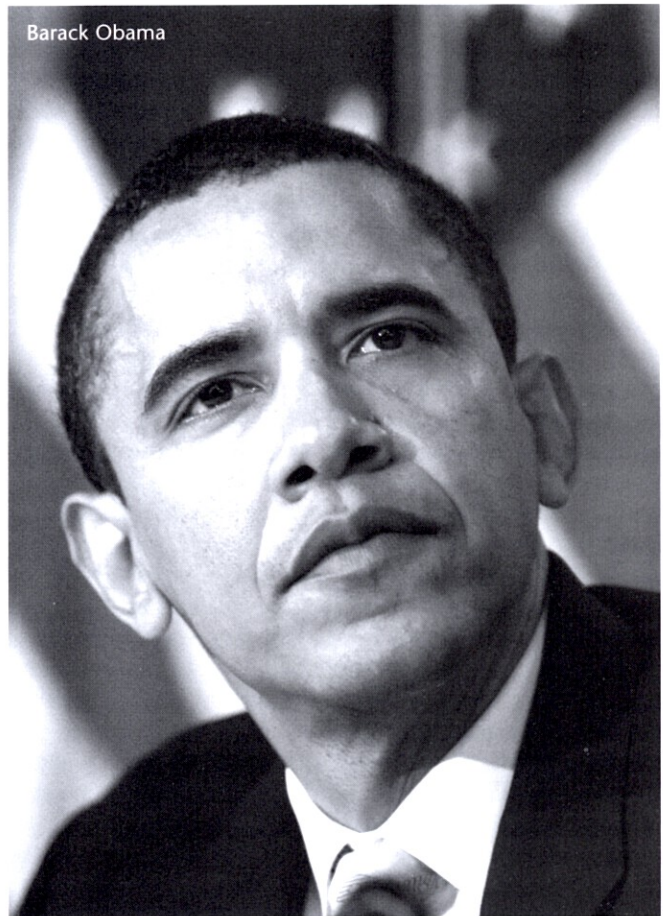


arrival of the ads for Will Smith's latest film, *Seven Pounds*, particularly its promotional poster (first advertised roughly a month after the election): a close up shot of a suit-and-tied Will Smith, well groomed, and with a stately countenance that I wouldn't hesitate to call 'presidential'. Compared with the poster for *Hancock* (another close up shot of Smith—dishevelled enough to suggest vagrancy, but without compromising his good looks), one could read the respective posters as pre- and post- election images, thereby delineating a parallel between Smith and Obama, contingent on the latter's status.

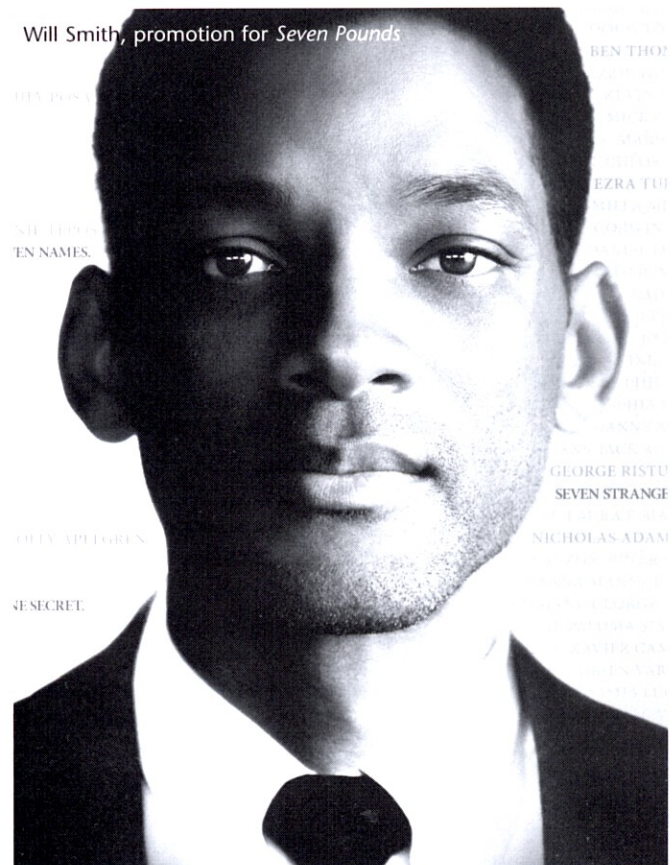
*Hancock* clearly exhibits its unattractively atypical superhero, however, it measures it out with a hearty dose of American sensibility (e.g. the conspicuous eagle on his hat, or the quasi-majestic Los Angeles sunrise reflected in his sunglasses, to say nothing of the less than subtle name "John Hancock"). Combining one part unattractive hero with another of American pride<sup>4</sup>, the poster is a condensation of this notion of the unlikely, unsightly hero whose extraordinary abilities and sense of national duty inspires him to fight for his country—the latter aspect being a compensation for the former. The poster for *Seven Pounds*, on the other hand, is much more to the point, as rather than beat you over the head with signifiers of American duty, it takes Obama himself as its reference point (no longer needing anyone's vote, its representational purpose, I'd argue, is to further institute the image of Obama—as president—into the cultural consciousness); however, the poster functions by signifying not Obama himself, but the schema of visual language that has been used to represent him (the poster itself not dissimilar to the iconic *HOPE* image surrounding Obama's campaign). The visual codes associated with Obama are there, inscribed into this image of Will Smith (the suit and tie, the expression on his face, and the strongest unit of semblance between the two, the colour of their skin, as for many, black skin is enough to make a tangible bond between characters far less similar than the protagonist of *Seven Pounds* and Obama), and through these codes a bond is formed between the two. The poster captures an essence of Obama, but not Obama himself (perhaps it is what Roland Barthes might call "Obamicity")<sup>5</sup>, but more than merely a process of connotation, by replicating the visual language used to represent Obama, this essence of Obama becomes embodied by the images of Will Smith. I would argue, moreover, that this similarity between Smith and Obama—as respectively expressed through these images—isn't quick to make itself obvious as a result of the supersaturation of the public sphere with images of Obama, so much so as to render the formation of any such bond invisible (as consistent with the aim of any ideological function); the two now share a language so familiar to us their connection hides under our noses.

In a recent short article in *Artforum*, David Joselit, in describing the 2008 presidential candidates, defines celebrity (i.e. their presence in the public sphere) as

Barack Obama



Will Smith, promotion for *Seven Pounds*





being played out by *avatars*: the “widely circulating image(s) derived from, but not identical to a person”<sup>6</sup>. In other words, they are the ethereal images that make up the public persona of figures like Obama, and moreover, are what provide the means by which the public are able to access them. As such, the persona of Obama, to invoke a Baudrillardian reading, is reduced to simulacra: the images and representations disseminated to the public are what construct and ultimately encapsulate him, enabling his very identity to be simulated by the campaign posters, the flickering images of him on TV and computer screens, and as I here argue, the aforementioned images of Will Smith. I’d like to suggest that if Obama is an avatar, then Will Smith is his adjunct. In fact, Obama’s identity has in a way become too big for an individual to manage (and understandably so, as seldom does anyone receive such an unfathomable amount of publicity, or take on such a larger-than-life persona), and consequently has been outsourced to Will Smith, relegating him a share of the task of representing Obama.

Naturally, problems of identity politics, as a consequence of this sort of play of image and identity, arise in consideration of this dyadic persona. Race and its representation, for instance, play a role in this situation, especially if, as I suggest, race is used as a unit of semblance to link figures like Will Smith and Barack Obama—the distancing of their racial identity from them as individuals as its consequence. The function of these images re-inscribes them with a uniform, purportedly ‘authentic’<sup>7</sup> concept of race that functions merely as visual code rather than something culturally relative, leaving racial identity as something to be overcome or overlooked, and allowing difference to be disavowed and blackness to be pacified in order to ultimately create figures suitable for identification by white audiences (Will Smith himself having moved toward taking on more roles as sort of caricatured non-threatening black man, such as in *Hitch*, for example, as opposed to his older films such as *Bad Boys*).

With *Hancock*, just as his grim appearance must be proven innocuous, so too must be the colour of his skin in order to ease the concerns of racially ambivalent viewers who are unable to work outside of an essentializing framework which understands race as a stable concept. The black skin that is put on display here is fetishized as a measure of disavowing difference in order to pacify the anxiety that it induces<sup>8</sup>, re-inscribing its subjects with a fixed conception of race. Hence, shuffling instituted character types goes only so far when those roles played with ultimately return to their initial place within a structure that posits them as immutable figures. This is to say, rather than present new alternatives for representing the superhero, those atypical differentiating factors are disavowed in order to reinstate traditional type-role relationships<sup>9</sup>.

In addition, this case presents an interesting account of the malleability of identity in its blurring of the borders between individual and identity. It is interesting to consider how, in light of the glut of visual information we receive, how we imagine the individual, particularly in an age where the mediation of identity increasingly alienates it from him/her (look no further than the countless Myspace/Facebook profiles that bestow so much trust in adequately presenting one’s self, often condensed into an immediately digestible profile-image, or avatar). I view these posters as a sort of expansion of the boundaries that constitute

Obama, as—if we are to consider him as a floating signifier of sorts—what signifies Obama becomes less reliant on Obama himself to be present in that process of signification. It, nevertheless poses the question of how we will view Obama (who enters his presidency in a time of unrivalled capability of the dissemination of information, visual and otherwise) given the many forms of mediation that make up the face of Barack Obama.

Whether or not we can glimpse in these images of Will Smith those of Obama, what I am confident of is that Obama, as we know him, will continue to be viewed under the auspices of the countless images that cite, mimic, or simulate him. What guises these images can possibly take, however, remains increasingly open, as what is constitutive of Obama has extended has beyond Obama himself (hence the faces on the covers of *Hancock* and *Seven Pounds*). Whether Will Smith will maintain his role as the adjunct avatar to Obama, I cannot say; however, when the casting directors of the Barack Obama biopic, set for release sometime in the late 2020s, look for their star, I’m sure Will Smith’s phone will be the first to ring.

PS. It has come to my attention (shortly after submitting this article) that Will Smith has, on more than one occasion, and as early as June 2008, expressed serious interest in portraying Obama in a biopic “as soon as he writes the end of the story.” Obama himself has stated that Smith would be appropriate to portray him (although, to be fair, Obama’s statement was perhaps more concerned with the similarity of their matching big ears)<sup>10</sup>. Nevertheless, it further implies that Will Smith himself has a vested interest in fashioning himself in the image of Obama.

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#### Notes

- 1 Due to brevity, as well as the limited scope of this article, I will be focussing on the images surrounding the films discussed (i.e. promotional posters: a widely visible manifestation of those images, which reaches an audience beyond just filmgoers), largely to the neglect of the films themselves. I should stress here that my concern is primarily with the image.
- 2 See Stuart Hall, “The Spectacle of the Other” in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: Sage, 1997). PAGES!
- 3 And what more, a blockbuster superhero film—the superhero being a traditional trope for playing out political conflict; take WWII-era Superman as an American defender against Nazism, for example.
- 4 It is relevant to note that *Hancock*’s American release was two days before the fourth of July, and that Will Smith himself is no stranger to heavy-handed exhibitions of American pride (cf. *Independence Day*, essentially a tale of stopping (illegal) aliens from invading America and taking it over, but that’s another essay in itself). Moreover, coincidence or not, in the days surrounding Obama’s inauguration *Ali* was periodically broadcast on television.
- 5 Roland Barthes, “The Rhetoric of the Image” in *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana Paperback, 1977) 33-37.
- 6 David Joselit, “Representative Governance” *Artforum* Vol. 47 No. 3 (November 2008) 99.
- 7 Bell Hooks, “Postmodern Blackness” in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader. Second Edition* ed. John Storey (Essex: Prentice Hall, 1998) 419.
- 8 Homi K. Bhabha, “The Other Question: The Stereotype and Colonial Discourse” in *Visual Culture: The Reader* eds. Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall (London: Sage, 1999) 374-376.
- 9 See Bell Hooks, “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators” in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. (Boston: South End Press, 1992).
- 10 Gil Kaufman, “Will Smith Says He Would Play Barack Obama On The Big Screen ‘As Soon As He Writes The End Of The Story’” MTV, <http://www.mtv.com/movies/news/articles/1589935/20080625/story.jhtml>.



## Lost in Translation

ON FRANK MILLER'S *THE SPIRIT*

BRIAN WILSON

My wife and I attended an evening screening of *The Spirit* (2008) the day after the film premiered at our local multiplex. Despite the fact that the theater was mostly empty (a fact not uncommon during Christmas break in our small college town, but one which I may also attribute to a general lack of interest in the film during its opening week), a group of teenagers sat directly behind us and proceeded to deliver their own particular form of commentary which lasted throughout the duration of the film. After the screening, while a few of us waited behind to see the closing credits, one member of this group offered his personal assessment of the film: "That was awful." I thought little of this statement at the time, given the nature of its source. But the more I came to reflect upon the film in the days to follow, the more I found myself in agreement with this assessment. Granted, *The Spirit* does not deserve to be seen among such outright failures of the comic book superhero genre as *Daredevil* (Mark Steven Johnson, 2003) or *The Fantastic Four* (Tim Story, 2005). But neither does the film offer any progressive steps

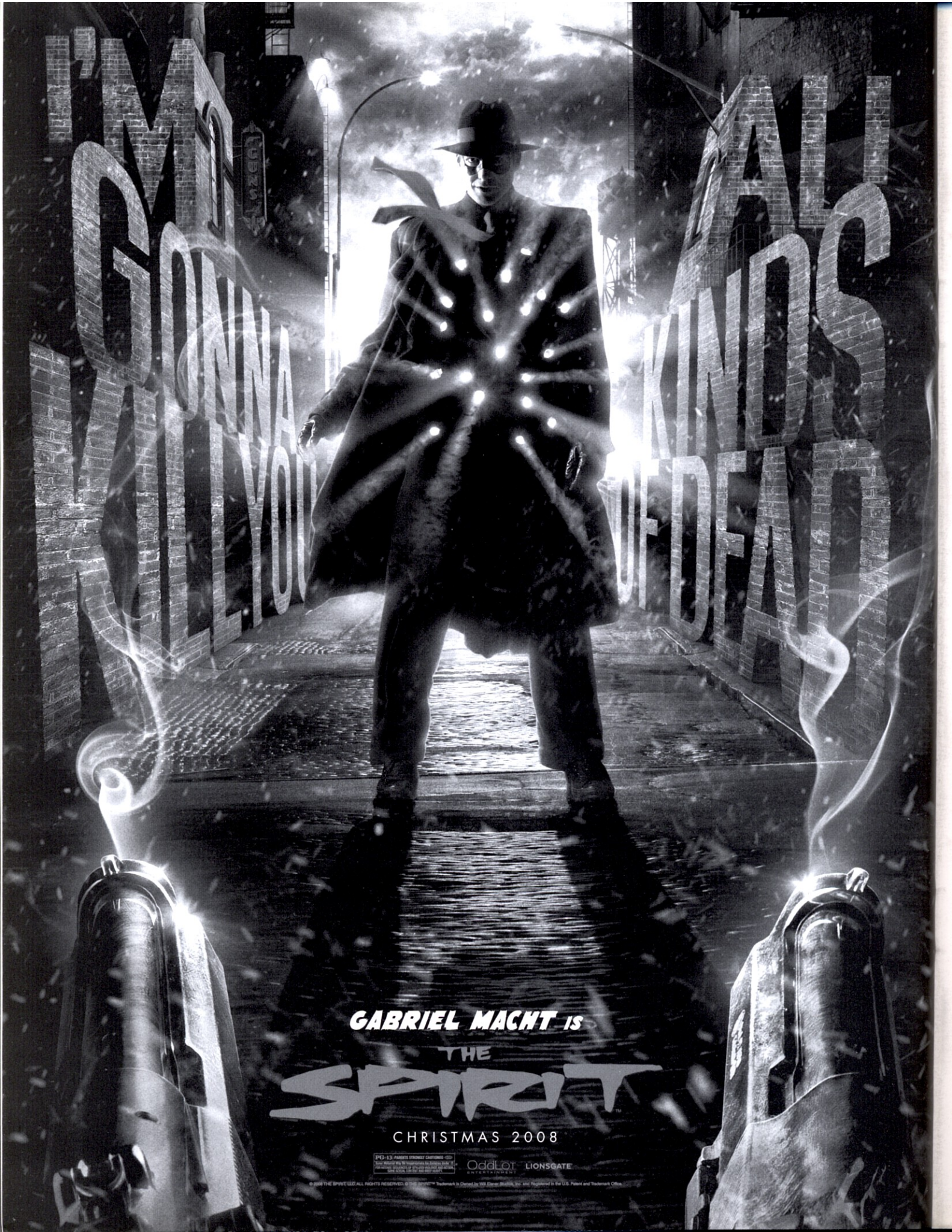
toward the legitimization of a genre which still faces critical disregard. As the title of this article suggests, I think the central failing of *The Spirit* resides in the nature of its adaptation. In its transformation from comic strip to film, several important factors appear to have been lost in translation.

*The Spirit* is based upon a comic strip supplement which appeared weekly in Sunday newspapers from 1940 to 1952. Although now largely forgotten by the general public, the strip is still widely regarded by critics as embodying one of the finest examples of early comic art. Despite its associations with the superhero genre, neither the strip nor its titular character embodied the genre in any traditional sense. Writer and artist Will Eisner used the strip to reflect important issues relevant to that specific period in American cultural history. It dealt directly with serious themes such as class, organized crime, and the plight of American G.I.s attempting to return to normality following the Second World War. *The Spirit* often featured a darker vision of American postwar society that shared more in common



Gabriel Macht as the Spirit.





**GABRIEL MACHT is**

THE  
**SPIRIT**

CHRISTMAS 2008

PG-13 PARENTS STRONGLY CAUTIONED  
Some Material May Be Inappropriate for Children Under 13

Odinor LIONSGATE  
entertainment

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with the crime fiction of Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett than with many contemporaneous examples of the comics medium. Eisner utilized a complex and innovative visual style to reinforce the strip's thematic focus. Many of the best installments of *The Spirit* closely resembled the *film noir* work of directors such as Billy Wilder and John Huston in terms of their approach to lighting and composition. Eisner often utilized canted and expressionistic angles, chiaroscuro lighting techniques, and innovative methods of panel arrangement within the comic page. Despite the cinematic associations of his stylistic approach, however, Eisner always spoke of his interest in comics as literature. His was not an attempt to mimic the form and content of the cinema, but to create original ways of working with and regarding the medium of comic art.

On the surface, veteran graphic novelist and fledgling director Frank Miller would seem an ideal choice for the cinematic adaptation of Eisner's original comic strip. Miller has achieved recognition for his contributions to the field of comic art, and is well known for such major works such as *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), *300* (1998), and the *Sin City* series (1991-1998). His works are often characterized by gritty, *noir*-inspired visuals and complex narrative structures reflecting a particular form of ideological disillusionment which has persisted within American culture from the 1980s to present day. As a director, Miller has retained many of the qualities informing his work in comic art. His first directorial credit, an adaptation of his own *Sin City* (co-directed by Robert Rodriguez, 2005), successfully translated many of the narrative and stylistic elements in operation within that series. Miller's transition to filmmaking seems appropriate given the clear connection to the cinema many of his comics possess in terms of both style and content. In fact, in contrast to Eisner's emphasis upon comics as literature, Miller has often spoken of his interest in the relation between comics and cinema (it is well known that the two were longtime friends, and often debated the issue in a collegial manner). But while Miller has clearly developed his own particular style in terms of his work in both mediums, it is his inability to adjust this style in relation to the adaptation of Eisner's work that proves detrimental to *The Spirit's* success.

In many ways, *The Spirit* seems like a sequel of sorts to *Sin City* in that both films contain nearly identical treatments of both form and content. Miller recycles the comic book aesthetic used to great effect by him and Rodriguez in *Sin City*. But while that approach may have proved successful in the earlier film, it seems here redundant and uninspired. Aside from their use of a monochromatic color palette, both films share a seemingly arbitrary emphasis upon the color red. *The Spirit* also utilizes certain graphic techniques originally employed in *Sin City* such as reverse silhouettes and digital enhancement to make the motion picture image resemble the comic book page. But the central issue here is that such stylistic strategies are not entirely compatible with Eisner's creative vision. Miller neglects Eisner's complex use of color and composition in favor of more simplified and artificial visual patterns.

*The Spirit* is also problematic in terms of its approach to content. Although the film does manage to incorporate several aspects of the dark humor often utilized by Eisner, it fails to translate the deeper structures of meaning operating within the original strip. Miller entirely avoids the strip's important emphasis upon social allegory and critique, opting instead to focus upon the more accessible elements of "Action, Mystery, Adventure" as the strip regularly advertised in its opening page. But the success of Eisner's work lay in its masterful integration of both aspects. Miller's film lacks the substance that the original strip contained. It too closely resembles other products of the genre such as *Ghost Rider* (Mark Steven Johnson, 2007) and *The Incredible Hulk* (Louis Leterrier, 2008) in terms of its emphasis upon the more visceral elements of action and violence.

Significantly, one element inextricably absent from Miller's film is the presence of the Ebony White character. The Spirit's sidekick in Eisner's original strip, White epitomized many of the racial prejudices against blacks during that period in American history. Often portrayed in a manner resembling blackface, White perpetuated the minstrel association with blacks common to an era of Jim Crow ideology. In recent years, however, the character has been given a revisionist treatment. In the 2007 relaunching of *The Spirit* for DC Comics, artist and writer Darwyn Cooke resurrected the White character for a more progressive era. White is now portrayed as an intelligent and mature young person, less of a sidekick and more of an equal to The Spirit. But Miller's film fails to deal with the character in any manner. Miller's decision to avoid White altogether certainly prevents the director from facing possible criticism for the role the character has played in the past, but it also prevents the character from receiving the attention he deserves.

I confess to having had high expectations for *The Spirit*. A film merging the creative forces of both Miller and Eisner seemed to contain much more potential for success than many of the uninspired products of the comic book superhero genre emerging today. But perhaps I placed too much confidence in a genre which, with the possible exception of Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (2008), has yet to produce any meaningful works of art. Despite the rich artistic and cultural role played by the superhero within the realm of comic art over the past several decades, the majority of recent comic book superhero films have offered only a narrow depiction of the genre's capabilities. In many ways, *The Spirit* epitomizes what is fundamentally lacking within these films. In neglecting the important social and cultural issues operating within Eisner's work and placing its focus instead upon the more visceral aspects of action and violence, it has contributed to a perpetual recognition of the genre as simply a source of escapism and mindless entertainment. *The Spirit* has certainly failed to redeem the comic book superhero genre for present audiences. But the potential still exists for future works.

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## "Tone Down the Boobs, Please!"

READING THE SPECIAL EFFECT BODY  
IN SUPERHERO MOVIES<sup>1</sup>

SABINE LEBEL

Superheroes have overcome their lowly pulp comic book beginnings to become an intrinsic part of North American pop culture. They have become iconic symbols to be reiterated and recycled in popular culture to mobilize and reflect themes, tensions, and anxieties of American ideology in terms of genre, gender, sexuality, class, politics, science and culture. Part of the nature of superhero stories has become the movement between mediums and across genres. Superheroes are constantly being re-embodied through different generations of comic books, TV serials, and films, not to mention the never-ending barrage of toys, candy, underpants, video games and other marketing products. As well, part of the history of the comic book superhero is that he or she is the product of many artists and writers who, over the years, subtly change and rework that persona. Scott Bukatman traces the history of the superhero body in his book, *Matters of Gravity*. With industrialism, railway and industrial accidents made the human body seem breakable.<sup>2</sup> It was after the horrors of World War I that Superman, "the Man of Steel," emerged.<sup>3</sup> In this incarnation he could not fly nor did he have an aversion to kryptonite but he could withstand the rigours of the Machine Age. In the 1960s and 1970s with the new Marvel superheroes like Spider-Man and the Hulk, science fiction and superhero weaknesses were injected into the superhero narrative. Superhero narratives re-imagine the limits of the human body – imagining them mixed with other species, crossed by science, and above all, imbued with superhuman god-like heroism. The year 2000 marked the release of a frenzy of superhero movies more in keeping with the traditional superhero story. Beginning with *X-Men* (2000), and including *X2* (2003), *X-Men: The Last Stand* (2006), *Spider-Man* (2002), *Spider-Man 2* (2004), *Spider-Man 3* (2007), *Hulk* (2003), *The Incredible Hulk* (2008), *Fantastic Four* (2005), *Catwoman* (2004), and *Superman Returns* (2006), these films use big budget special effects, such as Computer Generated Imagery (CGI or CG) technology, to embody the powers of the superhero and heroine.

What becomes obvious in watching these films is that they

are not only traditional in terms of the superhero narrative but they are positively regressive in terms of their portrayal of male and female bodies, and gender relations. Despite the varied creative re-workings of the superhero mentioned above, hypersexualized bodies remain an intrinsic part of the superhero and comic book legacy. Scott Bukatman says that in comics like *X-Men* and *W.I.L.D.C.A.T.S.*,

hypermasculine fantasy is also revealed, with unabashed obviousness, in the approach to female superheroes. The spectacle of the female body in these titles is so insistent, and the fetishism of breasts, thigh, and hair is so complete, that the comics seem to dare you to say anything about them that isn't just redundant. *Of course*, the female form has absurdly exaggerated sexual characteristics; *of course*, the costumes are skimpier than one could (or should) imagine; *of course*, there's no visible way that these costumes could stay in place; *of course*, these women represent simple adolescent masturbatory fantasies (with a healthy taste of the dominatrix).<sup>4</sup>

Included as part of this fantasy is, of course, the invincible and muscle bound male counterpart and his gear. As any feminist knows, watching mainstream Hollywood movies, especially big budget action movies, is contradictory. It requires an ambiguous viewing position, what feminists term the "guilty pleasures" of watching blockbuster movies that are politically conflicted. As a feminist reading strategy, guilty pleasure acknowledges the ideological contradictions present in mass texts like Hollywood blockbusters. This strategy assumes that signification is contested and recognizes the negotiations that the consumer-spectator engages in while viewing such texts. Although blockbuster, action, and sci-fi movies are often racist, classist, sexist, and homophobic, these readings do not always capture the complexities of the anxieties about the body, gender, science, and



Rebecca Romijn as Mystique in *X-Men* (2000)





the status quo that are being played out. Simply criticizing the representation of race and gender in the latest cycle of superhero movies is too easy; it does not provide a satisfying reading of these texts. Nicholas Mirzoeff shows that reading cultural texts in terms of the representations of race, class, and gender has become obvious, even banal, because of the ways that racism or sexism are intentionally played to by dominant culture.<sup>5</sup> Ambivalence and ambiguity are deliberately mobilized, often in conservative ways, so that traditional modes of film such as reading a text against the grain or exploring the inherent contradictions present in a text are thwarted.<sup>6</sup> Some feminist critiques, such as reading the representation of particular bodies, are apparent to mass and academic audiences and yet racism and sexism continue to be pernicious problems. The question of how to continue the academic project of feminism when our critiques are obvious, and therefore potentially politically unproductive, is difficult. As a fan of action movies and a comic book reader, I look forward to the release of superhero movies. I want to like these films. What is at stake in the recent cycle of superhero films with respect to the superheroic body? What anxieties are at play in the production of these reductively gendered bodies? Why have aspects of the revisionary superhero text and body not been translated into this recent cycle of superhero films? What is a feminist to do with these films?

Examining the use of CGI to represent the body of the superhero is central to reading and understanding the recent cycle of superhero films. Much of the discussion surrounding CGI in both trade magazines and by film theorists has focused on the conditions and limits of that technology, and innovations to it.<sup>7</sup> Industry publications such as *Cinefex* and *American Cinematographer* offer detailed discussions of how CGI techniques are used in different film productions. These articles reveal how the body is produced, the priorities in producing such bodies, and some of the implications of CGI to overall film production. In the recent cycle of superhero films, the superhero/ine body is produced through a composite of the actor playing the character, stunt doubles, and, increasingly, the use of CGI technology. Don Burgess, the cinematographer for *Spider-Man*, asks, "are these real actors, stunt doubles, or CG characters?"<sup>8</sup> Visual effects supervisor Michael L. Fink talks about trying to keep the film budget of *X-Men* at \$75 million US while still accommodating the necessary special effects.<sup>9</sup> He says, "The difficulty of keeping the visual effects budget down was due, in part, to the variety of effects required for a film in which each major character would have his or her own set of superpowers."<sup>10</sup> And, "It was made very clear that Bryan [Singer, the director], Tom [Desanto, executive producer] and screenwriter David Hayter kept reworking the script to get the numbers down while keeping a compelling storyline."<sup>11</sup> Scott Bukatman says that the superhero performance and body are dependent on the public gaze.<sup>12</sup> These bodies literally erupt and demand to be looked at, and the CGI body is a spectacle to be visually consumed. Due to the great cost of CGI, the bodies are literally created at the expense of the plot. The body becomes the site on which the narrative is played out and enacted. In any film, deliberate and detailed aesthetic decisions about how bodies "should" look are part of production, but where CGI is involved, the possibilities for creating different bodies are theoretically

endless. These discussions also highlight the constructedness of the bodies in superhero films. Considering CGI effects and bodies requires a shift from doing a conventional textual analysis to a consideration of the production process, or at least the production of CGI bodies. This paper endeavours to do just that. I will explore the construction of the superhero body, specifically, how gender and race work to stabilize the rupturing CGI superhero action body. I will focus on those films and bodies that are most discussed in special effects industry magazines such as *American Cinematographer* and *Cinefex*, focusing on the bodies of Hulk, Spider-Man, and Mystique.

According to Julia Moszkowicz, much of the literature on digital cinema is celebratory and tends to focus on improvements and changes to the technology, rather than the conditions which create and produce digital images.<sup>13</sup> Improvements to how "real" or believable digital animation is dominates discussions including the texture of hair and clothing, for example. It is not the technological innovation defining the aesthetics of a film that this type of literature tends to examine, but as Moszkowicz explains in "To Infinity and Beyond: Assessing the Technological Imperative in Computer Animation", it is notions of "realness" and "realism," which are informed by aesthetic





decisions and norms from earlier technologies and medias, that dominate.<sup>14</sup> With respect to CGI and other digital technologies, the focus is, for example, on the “realness” of the dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park*.<sup>15</sup> It is worth remembering that in the case of both dinosaurs and super-heroes, the constructed images can only be strictly products of the imagination of those who produce them. Because CGI seems to work with “natural vision,” as though we were seeing it unfold with our own eyes, it can be easy to forget that it is a product of artistic and scientific practices.<sup>16</sup> For example, in the film *Shrek* CGI animators were concerned with making Fiona’s eyes and skin aesthetically pleasing so that it would be “believable” when Shrek falls in love with her.<sup>17</sup> Realness and believability in the construction of virtual bodies reveal expectations about how flesh and blood bodies “should” look, especially in terms of gender, whether the heroine is in human or ogre form. In superhero movies, where superhero sequences are done with CGI technology, the human actor is literally becoming a special effect, or the superhero CGI character. Superhero bodies such as The Hulk or Spider-Man are unbelievable bodies that are meant to look “believable”. We start with blank page bodies and make them into whatever we want them to be.

In scifi action films, heroic masculinity has become more and

more ambiguously constructed, hysterically coded as stable and natural but simultaneously assaulted and torn apart in a myriad of ways. In her essay, “Action Bodies in Futurist Spaces: Bodybuilder Stardom as Special Effect”, Linda Mizejewski looks at how the male superbody reimagines and transforms the body and its genders.<sup>18</sup> She suggests that there is a relationship between the male body and special effects in science fiction films of the 1990s. Both push visual limits with regards to “the impossible” and the “unnatural.” This can be seen in films beginning in the 1980s starring Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone, and Jean-Claude Van Damme where the “natural” body becomes almost unbelievably muscle-bound. It continued in the 1990s with films like *Total Recall* (1990), *Lawnmower Man* (1992), as well as *Johnny Mnemonic* (1995). These texts code masculinity, especially white, heterosexual, aggressive, heroic masculinity as stable and traditional – natural – but they play it out on muscular “superbodies,” bodies so unbelievably muscular that they almost blatantly invite us to view them as unnatural.<sup>19</sup> Mizejewski suggests that the persistence of the muscular male body builder body that is so fiercely coded as “normal” or “natural” in films like *Timecop* (1994) and *Demolition Man* (1993), among others, is a clue to its nervous



Michelle Pfeiffer as Selina Kyle (left), and as Catwoman in *Batman Returns* (1992)





Edward Norton as Hulk in *The Incredible Hulk* (2008)

self-consciousness. In other words, the hypermasculine body reveals anxiety about a loss of “natural” or “essential” masculinity understood as muscular and heroic. The bodies of Schwarzenegger, Stallone, and Van Damme that Mizejewski discusses are real—but they are also unbelievable. She suggests that the representation of masculinity is so exaggerated in the muscular superbodily that it becomes akin to a “magical” special effect.<sup>20</sup> This obscures the hypermasculine body as “natural” and works to destabilize the male super body.

Some superheroes are more obviously linked to a body-builder lineage than others. The bodies of the Thing from *Fantastic Four* and the Hulk function as parodies of masculinity as violent and muscular; the Thing has a scaly-looking brown hard body that protects him from physical attacks while the Hulk is green, massive, and grotesquely muscled. Similarly, reading about the production of the Spider-Man body reveals the obsessive and fetishistic nature of creating the Spider-Man physique. Detailed in *American Cinematographer* are problems and issues with matching costume colours between the day and night sequences, the live-action sequences, and CG sequences.<sup>21</sup> *Spider-Man* cinematographer Burgess says:

...today's superheroes have to look as if they spend most of their time in the weight room, and even though Tobey [McGuire] is in great shape, the costume had to accentuate that to make him become more of a specimen. Instead of bulking up the suit with latex muscles, which would have made it cumbersome, Jim Acheson [the costume designer] added more than 120 silk-screened muscle-tone shading details to the suit.<sup>22</sup>

Imageworks animation supervisor, Anthony LaMolinara, speaks of the difficulties of animating the CGI Spider-Man,

The actual Spider-Man costume, which was skin-tight, was ... difficult to make believable, especially when he was flying between the buildings. To create the feeling that the character had volume of muscle and flesh inside his costume, we added extra muscle controls, then hand-edited the muscle movements.<sup>23</sup>





Spider-Man's body has been carefully crafted down to the most minute details. Reading these descriptions there is an insistence on the traditionally masculine aspects of the Spider-Man construct's body – namely his muscles. Even though Spider-Man is not necessarily coded as “hypermasculine”, his construction as heroic figure is signified, and emphasized, through built muscles.

In “The White Man's Muscles,” Richard Dyer traces the white bodybuilder body in Italian *pepla* films (adventure films based on classic stories starring American bodybuilders) to the films of Jean-Claude Van Damme, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Sylvester Stallone. He argues that white bodybuilder bodies parallel colonial concerns in these 90s action films; the mastery and control necessary to create the built body carries strong echoes of narratives of control and mastery of colonial rule.<sup>24</sup> Unlike the *pepla* films and films such as *Rambo*, superhero films do not necessarily or explicitly reference colonial relations. Yet, as with many American big-budget action films, they do have a tendency to posit their American heroes globally. In *X-Men*, Professor's Xavier's Cerebro machine is able to locate all mutants in the world. In *Superman Returns* (2006), Superman flies into outer space, hovers above the earth, and “listens” to the sounds of the

globe including different languages, motors, sirens, babies crying, and alarms, but ultimately rushes back to stop a crime in New York City. Typically the action happens in the US, represented as the centre of the globe. Although these may be peripheral details with respect to plot, they are critical for the heroic aspect of the character, building his scope and importance. At the end of *Hulk* (2003) Hulk/Bruce Banner escapes to the Amazonian rainforest to work as a doctor. In *The Incredible Hulk* (2008), a traumatized Bruce Banner hides out in the Rocinha Favela of Rio de Janeiro and works in a factory. His presence in Brazil carries strong colonial overtones and his relationship with the factory owner is paternalistic. Brazil is portrayed as under-technologized, as we see when Banner is able to fix the factory equipment helping to keep the out of date machinery working. Once the American military locates Banner, the poor neighbourhood he lives in becomes a playground for US military maneuvers. Hulk flees to Guatemala, through Mexico, and back to the US. American imperialism is taken for granted as Mexico, South, and Central America are represented as interchangeable and poor. They are also presented as uniformly “backwards” places, which is why Banner is able to go off the grid there.

Where Dyer connects the white bodybuilder body with colonialism, whiteness and heroic masculinity are connected in superhero movies. Superman, Spider-Man, and Hulk continue to be played by white actors. In terms of mainstream live action superhero films and television, it is significant that white superheroes remain white in live action retellings while both black and white actors have played the character of Catwoman. In the 1960s *Batman* television series Eartha Kitt played an unforgettable Catwoman. *Batman Returns* featured Michelle Pfeiffer in 1992 and in the 2004 *Catwoman* movie Halle Berry took over the Catwoman role. The casting of these roles illuminates the construction of femininity as changeable and is also a reminder of the racist portrayals of black women as animalistic in pop culture generally. The Hulk turning green undermines his whiteness at least to the extent that it “others” him. The Hulk is, like other superheroes, colonized by science, his body is an American military secret. Superhero bodies fit into the trajectory of big budget sci-fi action films where the body of the hero is a site of contradictory forces. If bodybuilder bodies played by live action actors function to essentialize masculinity as Mizejewski argues, but are so excessive that they function as a special effect, then special effect superhero bodies can be understood as even more contradictory narrative sites where the “natural” body of the actor is actually replaced by the CGI character. Superheroes are already bodies ripped apart, created by accidents of nature, the military, and science gone awry. Given this history, an essential masculinity is, in some ways, an improbability, yet in the recent cycle of superhero films it is precisely the inconsistencies of that masculinity that are being played out. The instability of the special effects bodies is in direct conflict with the narratives of these films which work to control and confine these bodies. Whiteness functions to shore up heroic masculinity in these films. Masculinity is also defined by, and in opposition to, femininity. Heteronormativity is also used to buttress heroic masculinity.

In *Hulk* and the *Spider-Man* films, Hulk and Spider-Man are both defined against and in relation to a feminine love interest,



who restores and defines them. Heterosexual romance is central to both the action of the Hulk and Spider-Man films and to the changing bodies of the heroes. The narratives in all three Spider-Man films suggest, albeit in different ways, that Mary-Jane is not only linked to Peter Parker and his changing body, but is crucial to Spider-Man's continued existence. As with *Hulk*, Spider-Man's changing body and masculinity analogize adolescence. The introductory monologue in *Spider-Man* connects what is happening to Spider-Man's body to Mary Jane. The voiceover that begins in the opening credits begins,

**Who am I? Are you sure you want to know? The story of my life is not for the faint of heart. If somebody said it was a happy little tale, if somebody told you I was just your average ordinary guy, not a care in the world, somebody lied. But let me assure you this, like any story worth telling, is all about a girl. That girl. The girl next door, Mary Jane Watson, the woman I have loved since before I even liked girls.**

The voiceover, narrated by Peter Parker, introduces the Spider-Man story and emphatically connects who Spider-Man "really is" to Mary Jane. Throughout all three films Mary Jane functions as little more than a place marker for "that girl, the girl next door." She exists solely in relation to Peter Parker/Spider-Man as a love interest and someone to be rescued. In *Spider-Man*, Green Goblin kidnaps Mary Jane and she is left hanging onto a broken and dangling balcony, screaming. Unsurprisingly, Dr. Octopus kidnaps Mary Jane again in the second film. Mary Jane is ultimately someone who can be used to manipulate Spider-Man. She is his liability, her femininity the repository for his weakness. Likewise, Bruce Banner's story of becoming the Hulk is totally linked to Betty Ross. His masculinity is "resolved" by finding a feminine counterpoint against which to define himself. When Banner literally erupts with emotion—anger—into the Hulk, it is Betty Ross who is able to restore him back to non-threatening human form. Kindness and understanding change the Hulk back to Bruce Banner. Betty Ross literally helps him to stay "human." Mary Jane and Betty Ross exist to be saved and fought over. Spider-Man and the Hulk are defined by their love interests, and, their humanity is defined by their masculinity, which is, in turn, insistently heterosexual.

Although these narratives work to reinforce white heteronormative masculinity, the CGI body and performance, and the superhero body generally, do not necessarily support such a reading. Reading the industry literature on the production of the Spider-Man construct mirrors the tensions played between the body of the superhero and the plot of the film. Watching CGI Spider-Man, his performance is lithe, supple, and quite beautiful. Director Sam Raimi describes Spider-Man's CGI performance as an "aerial ballet" and as a "graceful dancer."<sup>25</sup> Of any of the CGI superheroes, Spider-Man's body as he flies through the city has the most dancerly qualities—strength, mobility, and grace. In *Hulk* even CGI Hulk bounding through the desert loses his smashing lumbering destructiveness and appears almost nimble and free, seeming to belong in the landscape. On the one hand Spider-Man and Hulk are aggressively heroic, destroying villains in battles that cannot be contained by their surroundings, break-

ing down walls, ripping up train tracks, crumbling buildings and cliffs. Their bodies literally cannot be contained by "nature" or by human constructed spaces. On the other hand, alone in his environment, the CGI superhero performance is not necessarily defined by these traditionally masculine heroic qualities. Rather, the performance is defined by agility and beauty and it serves, in some ways, to stretch and challenge those very definitions of masculinity that the rest of the text works to set up.

In "Digital Heroes in Contemporary Hollywood: Exertion, Identification, and the Virtual Action Body," Lisa Purse considers how the bodies of digital heroes affect the spectator's pleasurable engagement with those bodies.<sup>26</sup> Action films are body-centered and work to produce an embodied response in the spectator.<sup>27</sup> Critics of the first two *Spider-Man* movies were dissatisfied with the computer animated human body because the CGI sequences did not persuade the spectator of what Purse calls "their (fictional) materiality."<sup>28</sup> Despite the attention to Spider-Man's physique described above, the action body in motion did not accommodate the spectator's expectations. Visual details of the virtual action body in motion which enable the spectator's pleasure include "mastering complex muscle and tendon structures, simulating physical forces of weight and counter-weight, mass, momentum, resistance, torque, impact, and so on."<sup>29</sup> Purse suggests that the amount of screen time given to the animated hero might help to account for the lack of connection experience by the critics.<sup>30</sup> Body-centered action films, including superhero movies, become a location where the allowable, or tolerable, limits of animated digital filmic bodies are negotiated by filmmakers and audiences.<sup>31</sup> Purse says that virtual heroes expose anxieties about change and mutability in the human body that audiences may not want to see enacted.<sup>32</sup> Critics of *Hulk* were even less satisfied with the CGI Hulk, which Purse attributes to the inherent instability of the Hulk character and body.<sup>33</sup> A crucial aspect of virtual heroes not explored by Purse is how gender, particularly masculinity, functions in action bodies.

One of the digital techniques used to represent the changes to the Hulk character is the morph, a technique that directly references anxieties about shifting body surfaces. In "After Arnold: Narratives of the Posthuman Cinema," Roger Warren Beebe suggests that the morph can be understood as a visual rupture—the figure that marks a shift in the ways that narratives are told in a given film.<sup>34</sup> He says that there are links between Gunning's cinema of attractions, where films show the audience something they have never seen before, and films that use morphing technology because of the centrality of non-narrative moments where the spectacle interrupts the narrative.<sup>35</sup> In the case of superhero films, the morph reinforces the fact that the narrative of the body is as important as the plot of the film. In his essay "Morphing and the Performance of Self" Scott Bukatman says that the morph suggests the ability for self and body to undergo transformations—to make and remake oneself.<sup>36</sup> Live action superhero movies pay attention to the body and showcase its spectacle of change. An inordinate amount of screen time is given to the visual spectacle of the shifting body, highlighting the difficulties of animating, editing, and showcasing the imaginary and unbelievable superhero body—through human, stunt double, and/or CGI embodiments. With the morph, this anxiety is heightened as it embodies these contradictions even more.



Tobey Maguire as Spiderman (2002)



Spiderman 2 (2004)







Wolverine/Hugh Jackman and Rogue/Anna Paquin in *X-Men* (2000)

Bukatman suggests that the morph is plastic and empty, tending towards stabilizing an unstable identity.<sup>37</sup> For superheroes this reads like a description of their bodies – identities that can safely, without physical damage, move between superhero and human – but that are essentially volatile.

If the morph is central to creating the visual spectacle of characters such as the Hulk, it epitomizes X-Men villain, Mystique. Mystique is a blue skinned, yellow eyed, scaly shape-shifting mutant who can take on the appearance of other humans. With this ability Mystique is able to impersonate virtually anybody and infiltrate almost any building. In the first two X-Men films, she is able to impersonate, among others, members of the government and various X-Men in order to steal information and convince various characters to act in ways conducive to achieving the villainous Brotherhood's goals. Her powers embody and visualize the anxieties about transformation and volatility in the human body, which, as Lisa Purse explains, often typify villainous characters.<sup>38</sup> Not only is she deceptive, but her character is created by techniques of visual deception, CGI and morphing technologies.<sup>39</sup> When Mystique is not in her own form, but that of another human, the only way she can be identified is by a yellow eye flash. As Purse points out, even this eye flash does not

always let the audience know when it is Mystique embodying another human, reinforcing once again the multiple deceptions of her character. Not only do her powers typify villainous characters, but I would suggest they also characterize the powers of female superheroines in the *X-Men* cycle of films.

The *X-Men* are a team of heroes who fight a group of organized villains, separating them from the lone crime fighter superhero narratives. Scott Bukatman says that the X-Men are "transgressive, uncontrollable, and alternative" and that their mutant bodies in comic books are directly correlated with historically subjugated bodies – queers, Jews, people of colour, and First Nations bodies.<sup>40</sup> *X-Men* comics have become known as the "multicultural" comic book because the mutant heroes are more diverse than the American and white-dominated pages of Batman, Superman, or the Hulk. For example, they include German Nightcrawler, Russian Colossus, African Storm, and Canadian Wolverine as well as strong female figures like Rogue, Storm, and Jean Grey/Phoenix. However, other than Storm, these bodies are all still white. Bukatman suggests that superheroines in these and other comics do not just have "wimpy powers" like invisibility and telekinesis any more; they are more powerful and dangerous, and they now fight alongside their



male companions.<sup>41</sup> However, in live action films, although female superheroes do fight alongside their male companions, they tend to have markedly different powers than male superheroes. Looking back to the original comic book texts, the cross-medium migration from comic book to live action blockbuster film can be charted and read for how the superheroine bodies are mapped with respect to femininity. In these films, the female body consistently remains surprisingly “intact.” Neither the mutation nor special effects work to visually disrupt, dismantle, or change the surface of the female form. The powers attributed to female superhero bodies are linked to traditional notions of female power, including manipulation, sexuality, and masquerade (rather than brute physical or muscular strength). Masquerade can be understood as a drawing of attention to body surfaces through costume, make-up, or other effects, in order to draw attention away from the interior.<sup>42</sup> In superhero films, the signifiers of femininity that can be linked to masquerade – the ubiquitous hair, breasts, and bodies fetishized by the superhero outfits – can be said to draw the attention of the viewer to the idealized female form, leaving the superheroine’s supernatural powers hidden and internal. Her less “feminine” powers do not mark her body. Reading the bodies of superheroines, or the body narrative, without considering the storyline, female superhero bodies can be powerful, forcefully harnessing strengths and powers traditionally associated with femininity. However, the storylines tend to work to contain the bodies and strengths of the heroines.

Female mutant superheroes are also severely punished by the plots of the X-Men films. We see them naked and dead but not ripped apart. Perhaps one of the most disappointing comic-to-screen character transformations is that of Rogue who, in the comic books, is confident and capable, but appears in the X-Men films as a scared and helpless teenager who cannot adjust to her mutant powers. Jeffrey A. Brown argues that in her comic book incarnation, Rogue’s ability to steal a man’s (or another mutant’s) power with a touch or a kiss is fetishistic, drawing on the iconic powers of the dominatrix.<sup>43</sup> In the film trilogy, however, Rogue’s youth and inexperience are emphasized. By *X-Men: The Last Stand*, a scientist has developed a vaccine to “cure” mutants of being mutant, allowing them to become “normal” humans. Rogue, who is unable to touch her boyfriends and must wear gloves at all times, is thrilled. She gets inoculated with the vaccine, despite the virulent protests of other mutants, including her boyfriend. The storyline of the film works to control and severely limit Rogue’s powers, portraying her as a victim of her own strength. Because her powers are very much derived from notions of feminine strength, even drawing from the figure of the dominatrix in the comics as Brown suggests, the restoration of Rogue to mere human resolves as a curtailing not just of mutant powers, but also, crucially, of female force.

The Jean Grey/Phoenix character emerges in the X-Men comics when the Phoenix is a mighty alien entity that merges with Jean Grey, attracted to her powerful mind. Phoenix is not “bad” in the comics, but in *X-Men: The Last Stand*, Phoenix is the evil side of Jean Grey’s personality, and she joins the villainous Brotherhood. The storyline reinforces Jean Grey’s unstable emotional and mental state as significantly contributing to the manifestation of her powers. For example, when she gets angry or



Jean Grey/Famke Janssen in *X-Men* (2000)

upset she accidentally levitates objects in the room. In the final battle of the film, Jean Grey/Phoenix saves all the mutants by stopping needles fired at them containing the mutant vaccine. She stops them from being turned into “regular” humans. However, unable to control her powers, Jean Grey/Phoenix begins to systematically destroy the entire island of Alcatraz, where they are fighting. Objects hurl through the air, water rises out of the ocean, and Jean Grey/Phoenix begins to wreck everything and everyone. She is awesome and terrifying. Wolverine, her close friend, with his ability to quickly self-heal, walks towards her and begs her to stop, even as she rips his skin off. She whispers, “kill me,” and he stabs her with his claws to save everyone, including her, from herself.

The most interesting character of the X-Men trilogy with respect to femininity is Mystique. Her body literalizes masquerade. She revels in her powers and the possibilities of her body. When, in *X2*, Nightcrawler, whose natural state makes him look like a devil, asks Mystique why she does not just stay in the shape of a “normal” human, she replies, “I shouldn’t have to.” In terms of special effects, it is Rebecca Romijn-Stamos’s transformation into Mystique that dominates discussions in industry magazines like *Cinefex*. Body paint and over one hundred



reusable silicone prosthetics adorned Romijn-Stamos as Mystique.<sup>44</sup> Created by morphing technology, the character of Mystique can seamlessly transform into any human body. The technology augments the prosthetics by creating effects that cause the scales to emerge on her skin, "like a bird ruffling its feathers," for example.<sup>45</sup> As with the other superheroines, the costumes, special effects, and body paint tend to augment, rather than transplant the actor's body. CG techniques were needed to accommodate the character of Mystique's transformations. A computer programme that maps body points from body scans was used to match Romijn-Stamos' body as Mystique with that of the other actors in the sequences where Mystique mimics the form of another character, such as in the helicopter sequence in *X1*.<sup>46</sup> Not surprisingly, the discussions of special effects in superhero movies in *Cinefex* have typically gendered overtones. With Romijn-Stamos, the discussion emphasizes that she is a model. In discussing the body paint: "The switch from food coloring to paint was due to the fact that the former is much more difficult to remove than the latter; and Romijn-Stamos could hardly show up for modeling gigs with blue-tinged skin."<sup>47</sup> Later, discussing one of the sequences of *X2* where Mystique has taken on the form of Bobby (Iceman) and is infiltrating Cerebro, Erika Wlczak, the visual effects producer, describes the sequence as one of the "most challenging" because, "our synthetic Mystique had to match not only Rebecca Romijn-Stamos' model-like gait, but that of the actor playing Bobby, her previous incarnation. In essence, Kody [Sabourin, the lighter] had to make a CG representation of a supermodel walking like a guy."<sup>48</sup> The fact that Mystique, when she is in her "true" form is played by model Rebecca Stamos-Romijn, is continually reiterated.

In *X-Men: The Last Stand*, a guard with an anti-mutant vaccine dart shoots at Magneto and Mystique dives in front of it, saving him. She falls to the ground, twitches, her blue skin fades, and she becomes a regular human. Magneto abandons her there, naked and regular, and dismissively says to Pyro, "it's a shame, she was so beautiful". Of all of the female superheroes, Mystique is the only one whose powers manifest fully and visually on the surface of her body, allowing her to change gender, race, and appearance, and literalizing masquerade. Simultaneously and contradictorily, Mystique draws attention away from her real identity and powers, concealed on the interior of whichever body she has created for herself. The surface of her body can conceal her true identity and powers. The film works to construct this masquerade as frighteningly powerful and utterly feminine. When Mystique succumbs to the mutant vaccine dart, it exposes her simply as a human woman – naked and powerless. Mystique is fully neutralized; her amazing powers annihilated. Her body is stopped and the narrative of the film reinforces both her femininity and her failure, working to deactivate both the power of her female body and her "feminine" powers. Although the plot and narrative work to code her as female, her performance of transformation makes it clear that categories of gender should be irrelevant; but even though the character can easily change gender, the gender of both the character and the actor is continually reinforced. The fact that Mystique can change her body is repeatedly connected to her gender, reinforcing notions of masquerade as feminine. Her abil-

ity to change gender happens on the surface, using what Bukatman describes as the logic of the morph generally.<sup>49</sup> Her changes are not deep or lasting, but are marked by playfulness, transience, and surfaces, which, as Bukatman says, is more about exterior change than liberation.<sup>50</sup> More humiliated and emasculated than Jean Grey/Phoenix who is killed at full strength, Mystique is thoroughly neutralized by the film's narrative, stripped of her powers and left naked and vulnerable, not liberated at all.

### Conclusions: "These Are Mediocre Times"<sup>51</sup>

Mystique embodies the anxiety that Purse identifies when she argues that "virtual body's inherent mutability reverberates with unspoken fear of phenomenological instability and potentially monstrous metamorphosis within which state of flux the distinct is somehow lost."<sup>52</sup> It is difficult to ignore the gendered aspect of Mystique's powers. The way in which the *X3* storyline works to severely punish the most powerful female hero is yet another iteration of the punishment of strong female characters in Hollywood films, going back most obviously to the femme fatale in Noir films. Mainstream film and television have for decades imagined female bodies that ambiguously transgress gender norms, often "giving" them certain freedoms or strengths while simultaneously reining them in, in other ways. More recently, pop culture action heroines have appeared in TV shows such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997 to 2003) *Alias* (2001 to 2006), and *Heroes* (2006 to present), all of which star kick-ass, capable, and very feminine heroines.

Superhero bodies such as Mystique, Hulk, and Spider-Man are corporate creations that signal anxiety and ambiguity around conceptions of gender. The male superhero is housed in a rupturing body that is uncontainable, erupting, in violent ways, to literally transform into a special effect, the CGI body. The CGI special effects body of the male superhero is lithe, free, and joyful especially in contrast to the constraints, imposed by the narrative, on his body and masculinity. The female body is "too powerful" and is contained, not just by the narrative, but also by the production process that is unable or unwilling to imagine ways in which the surfaces of the female body might shift. Even in their moment of death the female heroines retain their female forms. The construction of the Hulk and Spider-Man virtual bodies reflects the contradictions and anxieties about masculinity and the instability of the male body. While the production of the special effect Hulk and Spider-Man bodies explores these contradictions, to a certain extent, the plot uses whiteness and heteronormativity to shore up traditional notions of heroic masculinity. Mystique's body literally embodies the tensions about the mutability of the human form, but the production of her special effect body and our final image of her as naked, disempowered and vulnerable both work to re-stabilize traditional notions of female gendered bodies and re-contain dangerous feminine power. When the plot, as with the Hulk and Spider-Man, works to limit the possibilities of mutability and change by shoring up traditional notions of gender, this strategy of re-enforcement only curtails and punishes Mystique. The contradictions between the body narrative and the plot of the film collide with the male heroes signaling anxiety and confusion. With the female heroes the body narrative and the plot of



the film coincide working to further reinforce traditional notions of gender.

What's a feminist to do with these bodies? The obviousness of a critique of the representation of gender and race diminishes the deliciousness of the guilty pleasure reading strategy. Looking at the cycle of superhero films and comparing them to what Geoff Klock describes as the revisionary superhero narrative illuminates the possibilities of the superhero narrative and body. In the 1980s revisionary superhero narratives appeared in the print comic genre and were gritty and cynical imaginings of our world inhabited by superheroes. These stories were deconstructions of the superhero rather than more traditional superhero stories and include Alan Moore's *The Watchmen* (1995) and Frank Miller's *Batman: Dark Knight Returns* (1997).<sup>53</sup> Both have recently been made into feature length films. Across mediums, superhero bodies and narratives vary greatly and take up different subject matter and concerns. Batman and Robin, in the television series *Batman* (1966-1968), were campy and over the top. The homoerotic subtext of the masked superhero duo is spoofed in the hilarious cartoon *The Ambiguously Gay Duo*, played on the television show *Saturday Night Live* (1996 – present) and in Michael Troy's novelty book, *Homo-Hero's Big Book of Fun and Adventure* (2002). Michael Chabon's novel, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (2000), takes up the early days of comic book publishing in New York. As well, *The Incredibles* (2004) is an animated movie about a family of superheroes living in witness protection in suburbia. *Unbreakable* (2000) is the story of a "regular" working class man who has incredible physical strength and his discovery of his power. All these texts deconstruct and reimagine the superhero narrative, and rework the good versus evil world view presented in traditional comics. These narratives queer, age, and relocate the superhero body and narrative, and paint morality in shades of gray. The possibilities revealed by these revisionary superhero narratives and bodies make clear the simplistic and regressive representation of gender in the recent cycle of superhero movies. Considering the production process and examining the use of CGI animation illuminates anxieties about how bodies could and should look, especially with respect to gender. Simply considering the representation of bodies would not necessarily reveal how CGI affects the construction of these superhero bodies.

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## Notes

- 1 Kirsten Dunst to Spider-Man video game makers, in response to Mary Jane's (played by Dunst in the Spider-Man movies) exaggerated cleavage in the video game character (Ireland On-Line. Retrieved September 4, 2004).
- 2 Scott Bukatman, *Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Supermen in the 20th Century* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 53.
- 3 *ibid.*
- 4 *ibid.*, 65.
- 5 Nicholas Mirzoeff, "The Subject of Visual Culture," in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (New York: Routledge, 2006), 9.
- 6 *ibid.*
- 7 Julia Moszkowicz, "To Infinity and Beyond: Assessing the Technological Imperative in Computer Animation," *Screen* 43/3 (2002), 298.
- 8 Jay Holben, "Spider's Strategem," *American Cinematographer* 83/6 (2002), 35.
- 9 Kevin H. Martin, "The X-Men Cometh," *Cinefex* 83 (2000), 73.

- 10 *ibid.*
- 11 *ibid.*
- 12 Scott Bukatman, *Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Supermen in the 20th Century* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 188.
- 13 Julia Moszkowicz, "To Infinity and Beyond: Assessing the Technological Imperative in Computer Animation," *Screen* 43/3 (2002), 294.
- 14 *ibid.*, 314.
- 15 *ibid.*, 298.
- 16 *ibid.*, 300.
- 17 *ibid.*, 298.
- 18 Linda Mizejewski, "Action Bodies in Futurist Spaces: Bodybuilder Stardom as Special Effect" in *Alien Zone II: The Spaces of Science Fiction Cinema*, ed. Annette Kuhn (New York: Verso, 1999), 154.
- 19 See Anne Balsamo's *Technologies of the Gendered Body* (1996) for a discussion of the muscular body as a product of technology.
- 20 Linda Mizejewski, "Action Bodies in Futurist Spaces: Bodybuilder Stardom as Special Effect," in *Alien Zone II: The Spaces of Science Fiction Cinema*, ed. Annette Kuhn (New York: Verso, 1999), 154.
- 21 Jay Holben, "Spider's Strategem," *American Cinematographer* 83/6 (2002), 36.
- 22 as quoted in *ibid.*
- 23 as quoted in Ron Magid, "Crawling the Walls," *American Cinematographer* 83/6 (2002), 53.
- 24 Richard Dyer, "The White Man's Muscles," in *Race and the Subject of Masculinities*, eds. Harry Stecopoulos and Michael Uebel (Durham and London: Duke University Press:1997), 311.
- 25 as quoted in Ron Magid, "Crawling the Walls," *American Cinematographer* 83/6 (2002), 46 and 49.
- 26 Lisa Purse, "Digital Heroes in Contemporary Hollywood: Exertion, Identification, and the Virtual Action Body," *Film Criticism* 32/1 (2007), 7.
- 27 *ibid.*
- 28 *ibid.*, 9-10.
- 29 *ibid.*, 11.
- 30 *ibid.*, 12.
- 31 *ibid.*, 23.
- 32 *ibid.*, 15.
- 33 *ibid.*, 18.
- 34 Roger Warren Beebe, "After Arnold: Narratives of the Posthuman Cinema," in *Meta-morphing: Visual Transformation and the Culture of Quick-change*, ed. Vivian Sobchack (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press: 2000), 160.
- 35 *ibid.*, 161.
- 36 Scott Bukatman, "Morphing and the Performance of Self," in *Meta-morphing: Visual Transformation and the Culture of Quick-change*, ed. Vivian Sobchack (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press: 2000), 226.
- 37 *ibid.*, 245.
- 38 Lisa Purse, "Digital Heroes in Contemporary Hollywood: Exertion, Identification, and the Virtual Action Body," *Film Criticism* 32/1 (2007), 17.
- 39 *ibid.*, 18.
- 40 Scott Bukatman, *Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Supermen in the 20th Century* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 40.
- 41 *ibid.*, 65.
- 42 Shelley Stamp Lindsey, "Horror, Femininity, and Carrie's Monstrous Puberty," in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press: 1996), 288. Although the term masquerade is usually attributed to Joan Riviere and Michèle Montrelay, Stamp Lindsey's essay, which draws on their theories to look at the film *Carrie* (1976), is more relevant to this study. In her essay, she examines the character of Carrie who, like many superheroines, has telepathic abilities, and is therefore more closely related to superheroine characters, like Jean Grey in the X-Men.
- 43 Jeffrey A. Brown, "Gender, Sexuality, and Toughness: The Bad Girls of Action Film and Comic Books," in *Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture*, ed. Sherrie A. Inness (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 66.
- 44 Kevin H. Martin, "The X-Men Cometh," *Cinefex* 83 (2000), 74.
- 45 *ibid.*, 82.
- 46 *ibid.*, 77.
- 47 *ibid.*, 81.
- 48 as quoted in *ibid.*, 89.
- 49 Scott Bukatman, "Morphing and the Performance of Self" in *Meta-morphing: Visual Transformation and the Culture of Quick-change*, ed. Vivian Sobchack (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press: 2000), 226.
- 50 *ibid.*
- 51 Elijah Price, the villain, to Audrey Dunn, the hero's wife, in the revisionary superhero film, *Unbreakable* (2000).
- 52 Lisa Purse, "Digital Heroes in Contemporary Hollywood: Exertion, Identification, and the Virtual Action Body," *Film Criticism* 32/1 (2007), 16.
- 53 *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why*



## Of Depth and Surfaces

### NOTES ON *WATCHMEN* AND OTHER (NON)REFLECTIONS ON PHENOMENOLOGICAL FILM EXPERIENCE

KEVIN WYNTER

#### **A Mirror That Holds No Reflection**

While attending school some years ago I came across an "art piece" occupying a large portion of an exposed brown brick wall in the main lobby of the building where most of my studying was conducted. In fact, I had literally crossed this "art piece" almost everyday for months before realizing a failure of vision on my part had concealed from me a most intriguing hermeneutic exercise. One day, while walking alongside this wall, I noticed a caption engraved in black-ink across a ceramic tile bolted eye-level into brown brick. Without reading the caption I sought out the artwork to which it referred. My eyes were drawn to the enormous paintings on each of my immediate sides and to each artwork's respective caption. When I returned to the empty space before me, I explained to myself that the missing artwork must be undergoing some kind of refurbishment or that the artwork was gone and the caption plate had simply not yet been removed (a conclusion with much merit as anyone who has attended a public university will attest matters pertaining to the most basic maintenance can often go ignored). As I began backing away from the empty wall I glanced over to the caption one last time and read the black-ink engraving. I stopped and stood still marveling equally at the bravery and idiocy of the caption, which read: *A Mirror That Holds No Reflection*.

At first I was overtaken by a sense of abhorrence toward such an artistic gesture; marking an empty wall with a "clever" caption strikes me as the type of anti-art I have never had much use for. After leaving the vicinity of the wall this initial impression remained with me, but, for whatever reasons, some more obvious than others, the wall and its caption imposed itself upon my imagination for the remainder of that day and it has continued to impose itself upon me. My abhorrence having thawed considerably since that first encounter, today I find the caption and the brown brick wall utterly fascinating, but fascinating only to the limits of a particular negativity. This negativity exerts its pressure within the range of my experience as a student of moving-images and the many fields of thought undergirding its study—but especially, for present purposes, phenomenology. In order to explain precisely how the wall and its caption have come to exert a kind of pressure of negativity upon me regarding my orientation toward certain moving images, a short diversion

through some foundational concepts in film studies and phenomenology is necessary.

#### **Film Experience and Sobchack's Intervention**

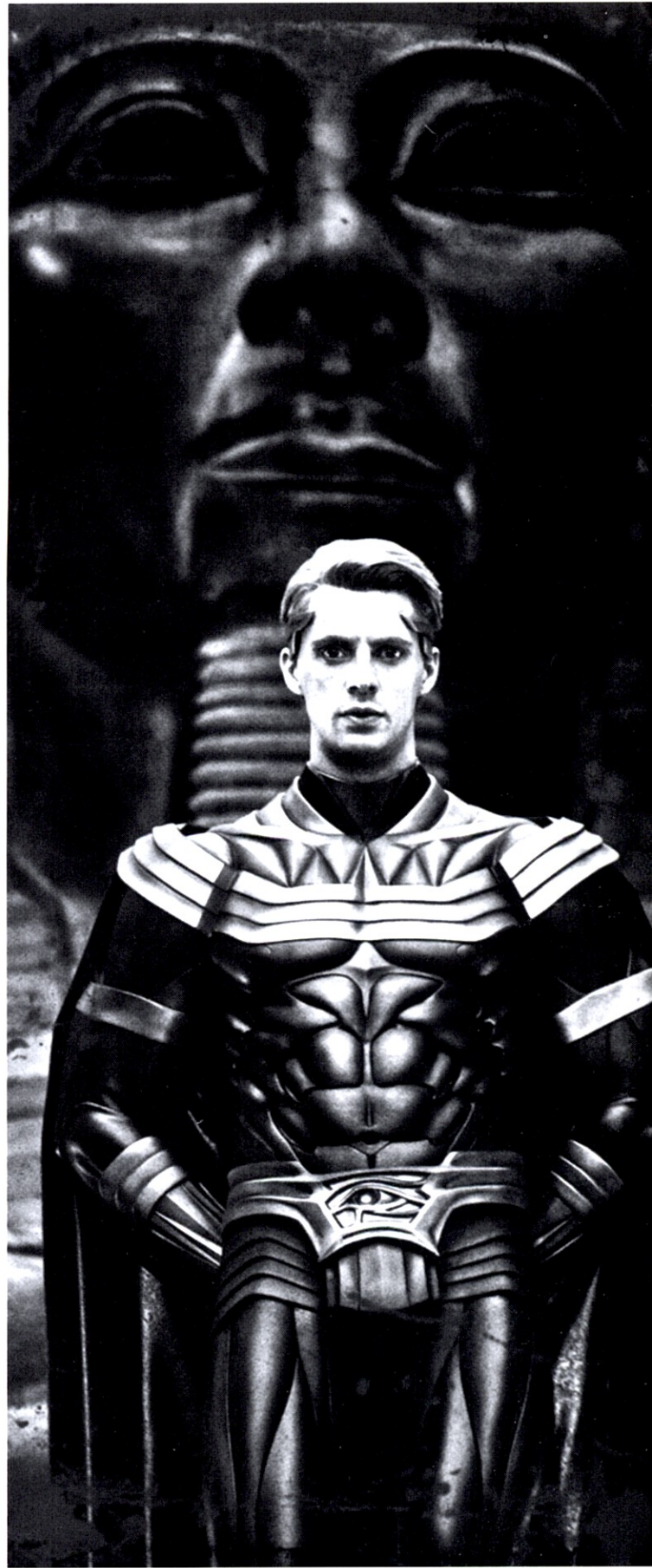
The publication of Vivian Sobchack's *The Address of The Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* in 1992 was something of an anomaly in film studies at a time when postmodern theories of multiplicity and fragmentation competed for discursive dominance with third-wave psychoanalytic thinking. Sobchack not only set her boat against the current among her contemporaries, she sought to unsettle the epistemological waters that had guided thinking about cinema from the beginning of the 20th century.

Sobchack claims that film theory has been dominated by three great metaphors: *the picture frame, the window and the mirror*.<sup>1</sup> Opening her discussion with an epigraph from Maurice Merleau-Ponty and relying heavily upon his phenomenological work on the experience of embodiment and human perception, Sobchack mobilizes an attack against these three dominant metaphors by calling attention to the way critical activity predicated on these metaphors situates the film object primarily in the position of viewed object while "only indirectly [acknowledging] the dynamic activity of viewing that is engaged in by both the film and the spectator, each as viewing subjects."<sup>2</sup> Sobchack takes her cue from Merleau-Ponty who, writing on the reversibility of embodied perception and expression in *The Visible and The Invisible*, posits, "...there is no dialectical reversal from one of these views to the other; we do not have to reassemble them into a synthesis: they are two aspects of the reversibility which is the ultimate truth."<sup>3</sup> Sobchack believes that inherent to the very nature of cinematic experience is the "exchange and reversibility of expression and perception," a belief she relies upon to produce an attempt at (nothing short of) re-ontologizing cinematic experience as foremost an "expression of experience by experience."<sup>4</sup> She argues that the trajectory of dominant thinking on cinema over the course of the 20th century disavows the potential for phenomenological "reversibility" and has sedimented into a tripartite configuration (a three-headed monster, of sorts) that disregards the fluid and organic relationship between the always-already intertwined





Silk Spectre II/Malin Akerman in *Watchmen* (2009)



Ozymandias/Matthew Goode in *Watchmen* (2009)



perceptual/expressive activity of the spectator and the manner in which cinema rearticulates that very activity. For the sake of brevity this configuration may be expressed as:

**Formalism:** Cinematic "language" developing out of montage attesting to the artist's mastery over the medium through the "restructuring of 'brute' referentiality and 'wild' meaning of cinematic images into personally determinate and expressive signification."<sup>5</sup> > **picture frame metaphor** > "expression-in-itself" > (ex. Eisenstein, Vertov, et al.)

**Realism:** Cinematic "being" emerging from the optical fidelity of the apparatus to re-present vision and "discover the world's expression in all its 'wild' meaning." > **window metaphor** > "perception-in-itself" > (ex. Renoir, De Sica, Welles...)

**Feminist Theory/Neo-Marxism:** Categorical collapse of perception and expression into reductive critical modulations positing cinematic signification as reflexive and reflective by focusing "on the essentially deceptive, illusionary, tautologically recursive, and coercive nature of the cinema and on its psychopathological and/or ideological functions of distorting existential experience."<sup>6</sup> > **mirror metaphor** > psychic distortion of perceptual and expressive experiences > (ex. Powell, Hitchcock, Lynch...)

Sobchack wishes to push pass the limits of what she sees as orthodox film theory and the manner in which it has ignored the *whole correlational structure* of film experience by returning to the spectator the *experience of film experience* as such. She presumes the possibility of this re-ontologizing of film experience through one of the foundational terms of phenomenology originating in the work of Aristotle and later taken up in the work of Franz Brentano and after, Edmund Husserl: *intentionality*. For the purposes of phenomenological inquiry, "intentionality" serves as a key concept for understanding and classifying conscious acts and experiential mental processes. Sobchack uses this term as means for proposing, in the context of film experience, that "the act of consciousness is 'never' empty and 'in-itself,' but rather always intending toward and in relation to an object."<sup>7</sup> From this insight she arrives at the following conclusion: "...consciousness thus necessarily entails the *mediation* of an *activity* and an *object*."<sup>8</sup> By privileging the site of the spectator's body and the fluid mechanisms of perception and expression as always-already at work and mediated by the very fact of one's being-in-the-world and, more radically, by conferring the same phenomenologically reversible operations of consciousness as an activity of perception and expression upon the cinematic apparatus itself, Sobchack collapses the discrete categories of perception, expression and mediation she sees film theory's foundational narratives propped up upon. This phenomenological orientation toward film experience leads Sobchack to the belief that "film experience cannot be considered a monologic one between a viewing subject and a viewed object. Rather, it is a dialogical and dialectical engagement of two viewing subjects who also exist as visible objects."<sup>9</sup>

This is something of a radical claim without entirely effecting a radical break from orthodox film theory and (for my purposes) the mirror metaphor, at least to this extent: if the screen and the spectator are to enter into a non-monological relation where perceptual experiences are reversible, it logically follows that this dialectically reversible formation of screen/subject as *viewing subject/viewed object* must exhibit a similar orientation toward depth as the objects and space contained in a mirror's reflection; it could not be otherwise, for if an illuminated screen in a phenomenologically dialectical arrangement with a subject can function as an act of consciousness it necessarily follows that the correlational structure of the arrangement be, in principle, equivalent. In this arrangement, the illusory depth of field of the illuminated screen and the perceptual depth of field of the subject are bracketed as homologous. But beyond equivalences of perceptual depth and spatial fields of experience, Sobchack's phenomenological account of film spectatorship as a fluid, permeable operation offers some crucial amendments to the psychoanalytic tradition of *mirror theory* in cinema.

Enumerating the deficiencies of *mirror theory* is beyond the scope of the present work, but one deficiency in particular is noteworthy. One of the great illusions of the mirror encounter as it is often portrayed in critical discourse is the perception of uniformity; that a reflection is a homogeneous re-presentation of oneness experienced at any given instance of an individual's being-in-the world. In these encounters the mirror functions, in-itself, without difference. Take as an example Laura Mulvey's account of metaphorized mirror encounters between gendered-male spectators and Hollywood cinema in her all-too influential essay, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. Mulvey draws explicitly from Lacan's elaboration of a child's formative encounter with his reflection in what Lacan calls *the mirror stage* – the moment when a child conceives his mirror reflection as an externally coherent subject, resulting in the misrecognition of an externally coherent self in the mirror thus helping forge the child's identity from an ego ideal. Lacan, and inevitably Mulvey, for all of their reliance on mirror images never seem concerned with the fact that not all mirrors are created equal. Mirrors have the capacity to reflect all sorts of distortions. There are mirrors that stretch our reflections, mirrors that distort space, mirrors that twist and curve us; mirrors that fracture our bodies...and there are *mirrors that hold no reflection*.

The greatest failure of the mirror metaphor in cinema studies as perpetrated by Mulvey and other likeminded film theorists is an obdurate refusal to incorporate into their concepts the irreducible contingencies of existential experience; the wild mutability of reflective surfaces capable of giving back to whatever lies before it an image of radical disjunction, a disjunction that distorts without breaking relationality.<sup>10</sup> To the same degree we can reject Siegfried Kracauer's claim that, "Films are the mirror of the prevailing society."<sup>11</sup> Cinema, as a matter of its very ontology, has never been a uniform "reflective" surface (at least conceptually), which would be necessary if films were to be capable of giving back to society an image of itself. Relations between a society and the images depicting that society in films are strictly of the order of re-presentation, not reflection. By the logic of the same capitalist structure Kracauer refers to, films depicting the ruling class serve a teleological function in a perpetually



accelerating system. These types of films are necessarily temporalized to an immediate and operative purpose and after serving that purpose are replaced with a new and timelier re-presentation in order to facilitate increased capital gain, and so on into perpetuity. Reflections, on the other hand, form a closed, atemporal circuit with the space and objects they contain. A reflection never seeks to expand beyond the range of its content, whereas a re-presentation always functions at the behest of a larger cause and in so doing inevitably breaks with relationality from the thing that it depicts.<sup>12</sup>

The matter here is pointedly a question of one's orientation toward the contents of an illusory depth, a question of the psychoanalytic model of psychic activity where subject/object relations morph into projection/reflection episodes (mirror theory) against the phenomenological notion of "a dialogical and dialectical engagement of two viewing subjects" who, in a radically reversible and equivalent sense, also exist for each other as visible objects. It is against this background that the brown brick wall and its caption exerts a pressure of negativity upon me, for within a certain epistemological range a mirror that holds no reflection precludes all confrontations between the self and the self-as-other; and to the same degree, a surface incapable of rendering depth precludes the types of experiential transactions of reversibility Sobchack argues for.

### ***Watchmen*, Through a Glass Darkly**

**Film experience is a system of communication based on bodily perception as a vehicle of conscious expression.<sup>13</sup>**

It occurred to me recently as I was leaving the Metreon in San Francisco after screening Zack Snyder's *Watchmen* (2009) why the brown brick wall conceived as a mirror that holds no reflection had something of an uncanny aura about it. I realized that I was already very familiar with mirrors that hold no reflection because American popular cinema (of which *Watchmen* is exemplary) *itself* is a mirror that holds no reflection.

As a child, I had read the graphic novel on which Snyder's film was based and recalled my experience of the narrative and its images as moments when I was moved outside myself. This was not an experience limited to the *Watchmen* graphic novel alone, but was an experience I recall having regularly when reading my most beloved comic books: the issue of *Iron Man* when Tony Stark's best friend is killed while reentering Earth's atmosphere in an older model of the Iron Man suit; the special edition of *Daredevil* where, from cover to cover, he is brutally beaten by his



Nite Owl/Patrick Wilson in *Watchmen* (2009)



foes in Hell's Kitchen; the rise and fall of The Beyonder in Marvel's *Secret Wars* and Havok losing control of his powers after making love to Rogue in *The Uncanny X-Men* are just a few examples.<sup>14</sup> In each case the images as expressions of moments in another space and time activated an affective response in me in the space and time of the experience. Even if I was incapable of attending to the broader meaning in the images they still remained affectively resonant without being cognitively available. It was years after my first reading of *Watchmen* before I understood the larger political and socio-ideological implications of the storyline; yet, an almost pre-symbolic space for my love had already been permitted, allowing me to enter into a dialogical (or phenomenological) relationship with the images at an experiential level.

For this reason the preponderance of superhero films in Hollywood over the past decade was of interest to me at the beginning of the cycle, but it quickly became apparent that these screen adaptations were nothing more than the vacant dancing shadows of the comic books that touched me in my childhood. Hollywood superhero films give off nothing; they reduce cinema to absolute surface. Even the ideological valences of each mythos in its original form is somehow absorbed and flattened against the cinematic screen. The film version of the *Watchmen* feigns to allegorize the corruptive, humanized behavior of superheroes as an effect of a disenchanted society and a world on the brink of annihilation from an ideological deadlock between communism and capitalism. But the images that support this meaning proceed without depth. In fact, every film in the current superhero cycle is utterly without depth, without mirror depth or phenomenological depth and thus incapable of genuinely mirroring society (Kracauer), activating psychic, identificatory responses (Mulvey/Lacan) or opening a reversibly dialectical engagement (Sobchack).<sup>15</sup>

In *The Ground of the Image*, Jean-Luc Nancy perspicaciously expresses the kind of experience the superhero film (and most Hollywood cinema) denies. Nancy writes,

[The image should not be] an "idea", which is an intelligible form, but a force that forces form to touch itself. If the spectator remains across from it, facing it, he sees only a disjunction between resemblance and dissimilarity. If he enters into this self-coincidence, then he enters into the image, he no longer looks at it – though he does not cease to be in front of it. He penetrates it, is penetrated by it: by it, its distance and its distinction, at the same time.<sup>16</sup>

Like Sobchack, Nancy suggests that if a moment presents itself in which an image permits entry into the self-coincidence of that particular experience, the spectator is able to slip past the disjunctions of resemblance and dissimilarity at the surface of the image and penetrate it, and be penetrated by it. This entry into the image is only possible when self-coincidence between spectator and image is possible, which in turn is only possible when an

image is experienced as *depth*. Images resigned to express nothing more than surface violently assert distance and disjunction with the spectator. Images resigned to express nothing more than surface depoliticize the meaning of images and deactivate experiential content. This is what the superhero film does so well.

The irony of all this is the mechanically reproduced image ontologically contains a sense of depth. A vast amount of energy must be expended to compress this depth into a purely surface image, which is always a consequence of industrial and financial interests. To this extent, Hollywood products (superhero films inclusive) and the mechanisms of capitalism demand that all depth in the image be compressed into absolute surface; or we may be brutally frank and, paraphrasing Derek Walcott, simply say this: Hollywood cinema proceeds with brutish necessity and wipes its hands on the napkins of a dirty cause.

One cannot help but heap invective upon the products of an industry that aspires to nothing more than that which can be scrubbed against a surface, a cinema devoid of all depth and dynamism. I have yet to see a superhero film that offers even the pretense of reaching across the metaphysical gulf that divides us to touch me as the comic books they are based upon once had. Only now do I realize why that experience with the brown brick wall seemed to me so uncanny after leaving *Watchmen* – it is because every time I had seen a superhero film, I had been staring at a brick wall, the consequences of which are such: in a mirror that holds no reflection there can be no dynamic and transitive correlation; there can be no reversibility in modes of seeing; no dialogic between viewing subjects and visible objects, only the brute materiality of a surface facilitating the conjunctural absorption of light, love and consciousness; a surface against which everything is absorbed and nothing is reflected.

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## Notes

- 1 Sobchack, Vivian. *The Address of The Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992. p. 13.
- 2 Ibid, 46.
- 3 Ibid, 37.
- 4 Ibid, 38.
- 5 Ibid, 46.
- 6 Ibid, 47.
- 7 Ibid, 48.
- 8 Ibid, 48.
- 9 Ibid, 52.
- 10 For this reason it is crucial that Laura Mulvey's essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* is heretofore never taught again in the Academy without making it conversant with phenomenological film experience.
- 11 Kracauer, Siegfried. "Little Shop Girls Go to the Movie," *The Mass Ornament*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995. p. 291.
- 12 If cinema must be a mirror then let it be a hall of mirrors; which is to say it is never a matter of possible distortion, but only a question of the magnitude of the distortion.
- 13 Sobchack, 13.
- 14 To this I would add the escapades of Emperor and Knight Optima in Mat Croombs' unpublished comic series *Mystic Tales* as a formative experience in my childhood.
- 15 It is possible that an allowance might be made for *The Dark Knight* (2008) insofar as Heath Ledger's portrayal of the Joker dynamizes the screen.
- 16 Nancy, Jean-Luc. *The Ground of the Image*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2005. p. 9.



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